

Idaho school merger— a plan long in limbo

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One of the most significant points recommended by Gov. John V. Evans in his recent State of the State message, but virtually forgotten, is the reduction of school districts.

"We can no longer justify the existence of 115 separate school districts in this state, each with its own separate administration," he said.

He noted that nearly 40 years ago the Legislature tackled this problem and greatly reduced the number of school districts.

He then added, "This Legislature must display that same kind of courage and apply it not only to schools, but to all local taxing districts."

There is talk of some legislation to implement this recommendation, but nothing has surfaced so far.

Allen P. Jeffries, retired four years but for more than 25 years with the Department of Education, including acting director of school consolidation at one time, gives an interesting background.

It was in 1947 — not the 40 years ago that Evans mentioned — that comprehensive school consolidation was instituted. It was the following two years, 1948-50, that it was implemented. School districts in Idaho were reduced from an astronomical figure of more than 1,300 to 117. A half dozen years ago, two were lopped off, including little Grouse District in Custer County.

Bonneville was one of the worst offenders, having some 32 school districts. They were reduced to the present three — Idaho Falls 91, East Bonneville 93, and Swan Valley 92. It was an emotional and traumatic experience with threats of violence widespread, but it was done under state law. A proposal to consolidate Districts 91 and 93 was beaten in a referendum by District 93 patrons by nearly 2-1 margin. But the 1 percent thrust will demand consideration of consolidation.

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The Department of Education has long had a proposal for consolidation. One drafted in 1969 by Jeffries, then the department's statistical service director, was intended to establish broad guidelines. It was intended to reduce the districts from 115 to between 45 and 50, and perhaps even less.

A bill to this effect in the 41st Session of 1969 was introduced but languished in the House Education Committee. It even called for \$51,000 appropriation to inaugurate the plan.

Generally it would authorize the State Board of Education to reorganize school districts and establish a state commission. This commission would consist of 12 members representing geographical areas and include representatives of school trustees, school administrators, Department of Education, and two members each from the Senate and House.

The reorganization plan proposed the following blood-boiling consolidation for East Idaho districts, reducing them from 22 to 10:

Consolidation of Idaho Falls 91, East Bonneville 93, Swan Valley 92, Shelley 60 and Ririe 242 for new District 90.

Consolidation of Challis 181

Mackay 182 and all of South Blaine in the Salmon River drainage area in District 180.

Consolidation of Salmon 291, and South Lemhi (Leadore) 292 in District 290.

Consolidation of Rexburg 321 and Sugar-Salem 322 into new District 330.

Consolidation of Blackfoot 42, Firth 59, Snake River 52 and most of Aberdeen 58 into District 50.

Unaffected would be Jefferson 251, Clark 161, Fremont 215

and Teton 401.

Jeffries points out presently the most grotesque is Canyon County, with nine school districts, and Twin Falls with eight, while Bingham is not far behind with five.

Now remember, these are just ideas but it gives food for thought, even though the food may seem indigestible for many. But admittedly it would save millions of dollars and bring greater efficiency.