

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

## Mega school district a risk

Phoenix voters to decide fate of proposal in November

**Pat Kossan** The Arizona Republic Feb. 4, 2008 12:00 AM

In November, Phoenix voters must decide if they want a new 116,000-student mega school district in the heart of the city.

Thirteen K-8 districts and the Phoenix Union High School District would combine into Arizona's largest. The new district would rank among the 20 biggest in the country.

Parents, teachers and students are struck by the size. Many fear an ineffective and unresponsive inner-city behemoth.

But the state commission proposing the merger says a single, unified district is needed.

The 14 existing districts are too small to be efficient, most commission members say.

The goal is to free up money for smaller classes and better-paid teachers and to smooth the transition for students into high school.

It's unclear whether megadistricts are successful at meeting such goals. Research on the impact of district size is scant and inconclusive.

What is clear is that should voters approve the merger, building the K-12 district will come with big problems to solve. Educators call the proposal a tall order, even a risk.

Cultures, government structures, advisory boards, administrations and teaching associations would need to be blended.

### **Turf wars could result**

Turf wars among districts trying to combine could result in an overloaded central office heavy with rules, regulations and competing administrators.

That could leave principals adrift, teachers powerless, and innovation and learning at a standstill. Eventually, parents would flee.

"You have extreme loyalties," said Jim Zaharis, former superintendent of the 70,000-student Mesa Unified District, Arizona's largest.

"How do you synthesize that? It's not impossible, but it's a unique set of challenges."

Yet there are large districts that work. Mesa remains focused on children and stays responsive to families, Zaharis said.

Size alone would not be the new district's problem nor would it be its salvation.

"There is no science to this," said Paul Koehler, a director for WestEd, a national education-research and public-policy agency. "Size is only one of the pieces."

## **Service comes first**

If Phoenix's new district is going to succeed, customer service to parents and encouraging innovation in teachers and students have to come first, educators say.

"You have to have the shortest possible distance between a patron and someone who can make a decision," said Barry Newbold, superintendent of Utah's 80,000-student K-12 Jordan School District, where voters recently opted to split the district in two.

"You can have two layers, or you can have 10," Newbold said. "If you have 10, you're dead."

Jack Dale is superintendent of the well-respected Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, the country's 12th-largest district, with 166,000 students.

Fairfax is divided into eight K-12 subdistricts of about 20,000 students and 25 schools, each with an assistant superintendent whose sole duty is to ensure quality instruction in the classroom.

It makes sure teachers and parents can quickly get problems resolved.

"It's the first line of customer focus beyond the principals," Dale said.

## **Megadistrict a hard sell**

Still, the new megadistrict is a hard sell.

Parents fear they would lose influence over their schools.

Teachers, staff members and administrators fear moving, getting demoted or losing their jobs.

Suzanne Schweiger-Nitchals sits on the governing board of Phoenix's Creighton Elementary School District, one of the 13 that would be combined with the Phoenix Union High School District.

She would be one of the 66 board members responsible for building the new district.

Like the majority of potential board members, she opposes the merger.

Schweiger-Nitchals fears a friendly, hard-working, kid-focused neighborhood school district would be lost in a giant governmental agency incapable of serving the needs of families and students living in poverty.

"Everybody is going to be so threatened," Schweiger-Nitchals said if the proposal succeeds. "Everybody's just going to stand there and say: 'What! What are we going to do?'"

"We don't have a year or a year and a half to lose on those kids while we're trying to reorganize. If it was something we thought would be good to do, it needs to be something we prepare for."

## **Using savings**

The new district also would have to save money in the central office.

Then, it would have to put the savings into learning supplies, teacher pay and reduced class size to meet the promise of unification.

But just how much a megadistrict could save or redistribute is up for debate. There is no solid research to lean on.

The new district would be served by one superintendent heading one central office, replacing 14.

For state redistricting-commission Chairman Martin Shultz, a utility-corporation executive, it's common sense that one superintendent would be cheaper than 14 and one or two curriculum directors would be cheaper, as well.

## **Savings minimal**

But Zaharis said money saved would be minimal.

"You could take (the cost of) central administration out of the whole state, and it won't save that much money; it won't make that big of a difference," said Zaharis, now with Greater Phoenix

Leadership.

Zaharis and other experienced superintendents and researchers say the real value of the proposed district is about the kids.

Separate elementary- and high-school districts try, but never really succeed, in creating smooth transitions for kids heading into high school, they say.

### **'You get benefits'**

When principals and teachers work as a district team, they can do a better job preparing kids.

"By trading for a K-12 system, whether it's 1,000 kids or 110,000 kids, you get benefits," Dale said.

"When schools are unified, you can compel, force, require and expect teachers and administrators and others to work together."

**Reach the reporter at [pat.kossan@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:pat.kossan@arizonarepublic.com).**

**Ballot proposals online** Find out more about Arizona's November ballot proposals to unify elementary- and high-school districts at [www.ade.az.gov/sdrc/](http://www.ade.az.gov/sdrc/).

**About redistricting** Nearly half of Arizona's 227 school districts are independent K-8 districts that feed into independent high-school districts.

In 2005, state lawmakers established a commission to draw up plans to unify elementary- and high-school districts into larger K-12 districts.

In November, voters in 76 districts throughout the state will be asked to approve the proposals, which seek to narrow the districts to 27.

Only residents within the 14 Phoenix districts will be able to vote on the mega-district proposal, and all of those districts would have to approve it. Should voters give the go-ahead, the building of the new district of 141 schools would be handed to 66 members of the combined governing boards from each district.

That is a board with more members than the state House of Representatives.

According to the law that established the School District Redistricting Commission, this new mega school board would have about a year to organize itself and the new district.