As Michigan public schools face greater demands and tighter budgets, policymakers are looking for ways to cut costs without compromising quality. One available option is school consolidation – combining the administrative services of two or more local districts. In May-June 2002, the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University commissioned a telephone survey of a representative sample of Michigan residents, asking whether or not they favored consolidation of Michigan’s schools. Participants were also asked a series of follow-up questions to see if their views changed when presented with some of the possible consequences of consolidation. In this report we present the results of this survey.

Who Favors Consolidation? Who Opposes it?

The results of our survey defy popular expectations in several respects. For example, Michigan’s long history of local control of schools would suggest that most people would oppose consolidation. In fact, Michigan residents are evenly split on the issue: in the survey, slightly more than 47 percent of respondents favored consolidation, while roughly 44 percent opposed it. The remaining nine percent of respondents either refused to answer the question or were undecided.

One might also suspect that parents of school-age children would be less likely to support consolidation than non-parents. This was indeed the case, but neither group indicated strong opposition. Slightly less than half (46 percent) of residents with children under 18 voiced support for consolidation, while slightly more than half (53 percent) of residents without children under 18 said they support it. Among parents with children in public schools, support was slightly weaker: only 41 percent of these respondents favor consolidation.

As might be expected, views on consolidation varied according to how satisfied people are with their local schools – but not by much. Respondents who assigned a grade of B or better to their local schools were equally divided when asked if they favor consolidation. Residents who are not satisfied with their local schools were only slightly more in favor of consolidation: of those who assigned a grade of C or below to their local schools, 53 percent supported consolidation while 46 percent were opposed.

Although more striking differences in support or opposition to school consolidation appeared across community types – rural, suburban and urban – there was no evidence of strong opposition to consolidation in any one of them. Rural respondents opposed consolidation 53 percent to 42 percent, while residents in small cities and towns favored it 55 percent to 42 percent. Suburban and urban residents were almost evenly split on the issue.

Opinions on consolidation differed
somewhat by race but, again, no one group voiced strong opposition to consolidation. For example, about 53 percent of African-American respondents said they favored consolidation; 45 percent were against it. Whites were equally divided. Perhaps most surprisingly, even sports enthusiasts failed to get exercised about the prospects of losing their home team or old rivalries. In fact, residents for whom athletics are “very important” or “somewhat important” were more likely to favor consolidation. Roughly 51 percent of these respondents favored consolidation, compared to only 45 percent of residents for whom athletics are “not very important” or “not important.”

Analysis of responses by category – by parents with children in school, satisfaction with local schools, community type, race and the importance of athletics – suggests that, while certain groups of people might be slightly more likely to oppose consolidation than others, people generally were evenly split on the issue. In many cases, neither position reflected the majority. We therefore investigated further, to see whether these were strongly held positions, and whether respondents understood the possible implications of school consolidation.

**Consequences Matter**

After giving their initial responses, participants were asked a series of three follow-up questions about the potential consequences of consolidation to see if their views would change under each hypothetical scenario. The kinds of questions asked differed according to the respondent’s original opinion on consolidation.

Respondents who initially favored consolidation were asked whether the following consequences would change their position: (1) if consolidation were to bring a greater mix of students into the district; (2) if consolidation meant that local citizens would have less say in how the consolidated district is run; (3) if consolidation would lead to school closings. Two of these potential consequences – a limit on citizen input and the possibility of school closings – were each likely to elicit a large change from support to opposition. As noted earlier, overall 44 percent of participants were in favor of consolidation while 47 percent opposed it. Given less opportunity for input, 73 percent
of respondents would now oppose consolidation and only 18 percent of respondents would still favor it. In the school closings scenario, 72 percent of respondents would now oppose consolidation; 19 percent would favor it. The possibility of a greater mix of students resulted in almost no change in support compared to the changes elicited by the other two potential consequences. Support for consolidation dropped to 43 percent from 44 percent and opposition rose to 48 percent from 47 percent.

Respondents who initially opposed consolidation were asked whether the following consequences would change their position: (1) if consolidation would reduce administrative costs; (2) if consolidation would lead to more specialized programs for students (such as foreign language, gifted and talented program, art and music); (3) if school closings would not result from consolidation. Of these three options, the offering of specialized programs was most likely to elicit a change of opinion. Given more specialized programs, support for consolidation rose to 66 percent from 44 percent, while opposition dropped more than 20 points to 25 percent from 48 percent. A reduction in administrative costs increased support to 60 percent, with 30 percent still opposed. A
guarantee that no schools would close elicited the smallest change. Under this scenario, 55 percent of respondents who originally opposed consolidation would now favor it and 36 percent would still oppose.

**Alternatives to consolidation**

Finally, all the survey participants were asked to choose the best way for their local school district to reduce costs and spending. Choices included sharing resources with other schools, consolidation, contracting for services, increasing class sizes and reducing the curriculum. The most popular choice, capturing 43 percent of respondents, was to share resources with other districts. Consolidation followed with 21 percent of respondents. Contracting for services, increasing class size, and reducing the curriculum were considered the least attractive options.

**Implications for Policy**

These survey results have three main implications for educational policy in Michigan. First, Michigan residents are not as strongly opposed to consolidation as popular wisdom might suggest. In fact, citizens appear to be closely divided. This is potentially good news for proponents of school consolidation, who point out that Michigan has more than 550 local school districts, many of which could benefit from consolidation. Supporters of consolidation also note that in most districts school board election turn out hovers in the single-digit range, suggesting that most citizens don’t pay much attention to how schools are run. Opponents of consolidation, on the other hand, argue that local control of schools is one of the bedrock American values, and that low voter turn out for school board elections indicates overall satisfaction with the current system of school governance.

The second implication of the survey results for policy is that support or opposition is likely to depend upon the perceived consequences of consolidation. While the possibilities of adding specialized programs and reducing administrative costs are considered attractive, residents do not want to lose control
over their local schools or – worse yet – lose them all together. Third, compared to other cost-reduction options, Michigan residents would clearly prefer to have their district share resources with other districts. Respondents nevertheless preferred consolidation to alternatives such as increases in class size or reductions in curriculum.

Together, these implications suggest that policymakers should first look for ways in which districts can share resources to reduce costs. At the same time these survey results suggest that Michigan residents are willing to consider school consolidation as a cost-cutting option. Finally, if consolidation is needed, policymakers should consider ways to maximize the benefits, such as greater course offerings, while trying to avoid local school closings.

The Survey
The survey on which this report is based was administered as part of the 26th wave of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research’s State of the State Survey. A total of 933 phone interviews were completed using list-assisted random-digit dial sampling procedures between May 21 and July 16, 2002. The margin of overall sampling error is ±3.2 percent. The data reported in this policy brief are weighted to be representative of the adult population in Michigan.

For more information about this survey and related policy issues visit the Education Policy Center website at www.epc.msu.edu or the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research website at www.ippsr.msu.edu.