

Anderson Journal

Five to one

Clemson will research what a consolidated school district might look like

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Take a tour of Anderson County's high schools and a trend emerges.

Some schools are in better shape than others; some have smaller class sizes; some offer more programs; some are more efficient and others offer higher teacher salaries.

Anderson County has five school districts, which by accident of history – the location of Interstate 85 – has led to varying levels of growth and prosperity. Property values vary widely among districts and the district with the lowest total value – School District 3 in Starr and Iva – also had the lowest tax rate in the county in 2006, according to county records.

County school board member Mike Gray, who has children who attended District 3 and District 5 schools, said he suspects a disparity in spending means



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SUBURBAN POWERHOUSES: The 12,000-student Anderson School District 5 has two large high schools – more than 1,700 students each – offering programs such as Russian, German and top-ranked debate teams.

kids born in the city of Anderson have access to a better education overall. At Hanna, close to a fifth of students take AP classes, compared to less than 5 percent at Crescent.

“If the interstate had gone through Iva, then that’s where all the money would be,” Gray said. “It’s all about geography. It’s crazy.”

Because no one really knows what could be gained or lost if programs or personnel were combined or shared across the county, the Anderson County Board of Education – charged with little more than approving the various districts’ budgets each year – has taken a new, activist stand to address some of the county’s education inequities.

A subcommittee led by Gray, and with the unanimous blessing of the nine-person county school board, has hired the Strom

Thurmond Institute to quantify the differences, in programs and finances, among the districts and to offer solutions for the best possible education to every student.

The study echoes a concern raised during the countywide Imagine Anderson 2026 initiative, whose final report recommends – albeit politically unlikely at this point – consolidating all five school districts.

The \$58,000 study should be ready by the summer of 2008, and school officials from across the county will be meeting Nov. 5 to decide how to work with Clemson University researchers Ellen Saltzman and Holley Ulbrich.

Ideal size

Combined, the county’s student population is almost 30,000 – a number that Williamston-based School District 1 Superintendent

Wayne Fowler said is too big for a single school district.

“In the next 10 years, it will get larger and larger and larger,” Fowler said.

Research backs Fowler’s opinion. In an oft-quoted 2003 report that Columbia-based researcher Harry Miley prepared for the state’s nonprofit Education Oversight Committee, the ideal school system was found to range from 2,500 to 25,000 students.

All of Anderson County’s school districts fall within that range, though that hasn’t always been the case.

Anderson County School Board records show the county had 74 school districts in 1950 – a number that was pared down to five by a 5-to-1 popular vote in 1952.

This was part of a statewide movement that saw South Carolina’s 1,220 districts in 1950 reduced to 108 by 1960, according

to Miley's report. Today, the state has 85 school districts, and 29 of them are countywide. School districts in South Carolina range from less than 1,000 students in Marion District 7 to about 66,000 in Greenville County.

The Strom Thurmond report aims, among other things, to figure out what the optimum number of students is for Anderson County school districts.

JoAnne Anderson, executive director of Education Oversight Committee, said her group supports district reorganization when money can be saved - either because a district is too large or too small - because that money could go to the classroom.

"Economies of scale are lost," Anderson said. "If all our school districts were between 2,500 and 25,000, using the dollars from 2002, we could save \$26 million. You could increase that to about \$35 million today."

Regardless of the financial or program arguments, many communities become defensive about consolidation when they've identified themselves with their local school board, she said.

"B-HP folks think B-HP is the center of the universe," she said. "It's their world and it is the center of the universe."

Anderson County School Board chairman Randy Price - who supported the Strom Thurmond study - said he believes the average citizen prefers to be represented by somebody they can get to easily.

Miley's study found big districts worked for students

who were well-to-do, while poorer students fared better in small districts, a finding that also supports Anderson County's setup.

Consolidation push

Talk of consolidation is nothing new in Anderson County.

School districts vary from 2,611 students in the Starr-Iva area to more than 12,000 in the Anderson area. SAT scores, meanwhile, are highest in District 1 (1042) and lowest in District 4 (961).

"You can say raise taxes - it's still not going to get (District 3) the money they need to compete with District 5 or District 1," Gray said.

State statistics show Pendleton-based School District 4 (home to Michelin) spent 25 percent more per student than Williamston-based District 1 (a high-performing, bedroom community of Greenville) - \$8,205 versus \$6,548. At the same time, the largest of the county's districts - Anderson-based School District 5 - spent about \$93.8 million in 2006 compared to School District 3's \$18.3 million.

Gray said that regardless of per-pupil spending, a larger district simply has more money to develop programs and facilities. He said consolidation may be one way to fix this but the Strom Thurmond researchers may come back with other recommendations - such as sharing programs or combining just two or three districts (the latter of which Marion and Orangeburg counties have done



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RURAL COMMUNITY: Crescent High School prides itself in tight discipline and a family-like atmosphere.

within the past decade).

Still, educators in these districts largely like things the way they are - and dread a countywide district office controlled from the city of Anderson.

"It's already hard enough to get anything done," said entrepreneurship teacher Aimee Gray of Starr-based Crescent High. "With a single school district, it's more bureaucracy."

"Kids would get lost in the shuffle," said Crescent High Principal Devon Smith, who heads up a school with 760 students - compared to the more than 1,700 students at T.L. Hanna High in Anderson.

Varying priorities among the

school districts are apparent in programs and academics. At Starr-Iva Middle, a nonprofit women's group is funding a sex-education program - a program that other school districts have passed on. While Pendleton has an award-winning band, it has no strings program. And Crescent sent about a dozen Future Farmers of America students to a national convention in Indianapolis last week. Also, District 3 students who didn't fare so well on the SAT scored second on the ACT.

"How is somebody in one part of the county going to understand the needs of somebody in another?" Smith said. "Bigger government isn't necessarily better."

Gary Burgess, the superintendent of District 4 schools, said no one will be interested in a study that pits the school districts against each other, though he's open to hearing about the best way to fund education.

"I really at this point have no opinion other than if it saves money, is the money that is saved worth consolidation if that's where we are headed?" he asked.

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Comparing school districts

SCHOOL SYSTEM	District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4	District 5
Headquarters:	Williamston	Belton	Starr	Pendleton	Anderson
Number of students:	8,626	3,716	2,611	2,854	12,045
2006 tax rate in mils:	263.5	326.20	248.7	267.4	290
Dollars per pupil:	\$6,548	\$7,046	\$6,990	\$8,205	\$7,788
Percent spent on instruction:	60.6	60.5	56.4	54.7	60.5
Average teacher salary:	\$44,091	\$43,801	\$41,342	\$41,297	\$42,624
Average age of facilities:	25 years	29	28	17	26
Average administrative salary:	\$75,342	\$79,527	\$72,113	\$73,710	\$75,108

* Anderson County's 2006 comprehensive audit and state Department of Education report cards