
The comments shown in red are a reply to some of the statements presented in this memo and are not from any employee or representative of the Agua Fria Union High School District.

MEMORANDUM

TO: AFUHSD Faculty & Staff

FROM: Dudley W. Butts, Superintendent

DATE: September 10, 2008

SUBJECT: Unification Update

I would like to update you on the current status of tri-district unification. There have been several developments since our spring staff meetings when I offered information and answered questions about unification.

The AFUHSD Governing Board has submitted the following statement regarding unification:

The Governing Board of the Agua Fria Union High School District supports, with reservation, unification with the Litchfield Elementary District and the Avondale Elementary District.

The Agua Fria Union High School District is held accountable for the academic performance of all of its students starting in the third semester of their high school careers. This accountability comes in the form of AYP (average yearly progress) at the federal level and through labeling at the state level. Not only is the district held accountable financially, but the local control and governance of the district is at stake. If we are to be held to these standards, it is imperative that the district is involved in the educating of students from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

The Governing Board's reservation lies in the ambiguity of the process and the unknown possible financial ramifications.

The Agua Fria Union High School District stands ready to accept the will of the voters. If the citizens of the district vote to support unification, we will do our very best to ensure its success. If the voters choose to vote it down, we will carry on.

The rationale for this position is as follows:

The “reservations” referred to in the Governing Board’s position statement are based on the ambiguity that surrounds the financial impact to the district, the degree of disruption to the educational process, and to the transition of governance. Many hard-to-answer questions surround this issue. For example:

- 1. What would the governance look like?**
- 2. What transition model would be followed to unify?**

3. Would money be saved in the long run?

There is research that has been done on this question. One piece of research is the Center for Policy Research at Syracuse University. The study is frequently cited by those pushing unification as showing that unification will save money. The study actually shows that there is an advantage of unifying districts that would combine to total between 500 and 6500 students. Above 6500 students, the costs actually begin to rise and continue to slowly rise until you reach 50,000 students. Above 50,000 students, the costs begin to dramatically rise and actually become less efficient than a district of 50 students. Read this research for yourself at http://www-cpr.maxwell.syr.edu/efap/Publications/Impact_of_Consolidation.pdf

The proposed district would start out between 23,000 and 25,000 students. Well above the 6500 where studies show that costs begin to increase.

Additionally, the Goldwater Institute looked at Arizona specifically. Here is a sample of their findings, *"A closer examination of the OAG report suggests statewide school district consolidation is unlikely to produce the hoped-for fiscal savings. Moreover, empirical research shows consolidation increases administrative costs at the expense of classroom instruction, yielding larger classes, fewer teachers, and lower student achievement. Therefore, consolidation is a marginal reform, best implemented on a limited, case-by-case basis."* Please read the paper for yourself at <http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/Common/Files/Multimedia/401.pdf>

What would it cost in the short run?

There is no doubt that there will be costs associated with the unification. The example of the unified student information system mentioned later in this memo will be used. A new and up-to-date student information system for a district of 25,000 students will cost upwards of \$500,000 – \$600,000, including an annual cost of approximately \$200,000 per year. This only accounts for one area of concern that would need to be unified. Where will the district get these funds? The state is only providing funds for changing signs and letterhead. How much more will it cost to unify the bussing systems, telephone systems, food service systems, ect.? The district will have to take these dollars from somewhere. The decision of what will be cut would be left to the new school board.

Secondly, all residents and businesses within the boundaries of Litchfield Elementary School District will experience a tax increase in order to equalize funding between Avondale Elementary and Litchfield Elementary. Will there be additional services, student programs, or increased salaries offered in exchange for this tax increase on the current citizens within LESD? No, these funds are purely used to balance the tax rate with Avondale Elementary.

4. Would any jobs be eliminated?

5. How would the Career Ladder program be affected?

According to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee, it will cost 40 million dollars statewide if the unified districts are allowed to join the Career Ladder system (Please read it for yourself- <http://www.ade.az.gov/sdrc/FinalReport/Appendix6-AttachmentA-EstimatedStateFiscallImpactofProposedSchoolDistrict.pdf>). As mentioned in the above comments by Mr. Butts there are no answers on what will happen with career ladder. Though it is conjecture, you can apply some logic to this discussion. Will the legislature of Arizona provide 40 million dollars to districts for equalizing teacher salaries? Does the Arizona Legislature have a track record of supporting education? Add on the recession and budget deficit of the state, there is virtually no chance of this money being given to districts to use. So what choices will the newly unified district be left with? The options for the new district to consider in order to balance salaries is to cut the salary of some teachers, cut programs and services or freeze salaries until additional funds are provided. In the first year of unification a teacher cannot make less than the previous year, however, the law only protects teacher salaries for one year.

The reality is that with any merger of separate entities, there will be issues and unanswered questions. If the target goal of “increasing student achievement for all students” is maintained, all issues can be resolved in a collegial manner.

These are not just any separate entities or businesses. These are our schools and these are our communities’ children.

Though they have more recently tried to present that the purpose of unification is for student achievement, the original targeted goal at the heart of those pushing unification has been cost savings. As the above research shows the exact opposite is more likely to happen.

There is no “parallel research” showing this will have any positive effect on student achievement. Are we willing to risk our students and schools achievement with so many unanswered questions?

The “support” referred to in the Governing Board’s position statement is based on our belief that our current system does not fully support our students academically as they transition from their elementary/middle school districts to the high school district.

This kind of “support” is not only found in unified districts. For example, other union high school districts in Arizona work in conjunction with their feeder districts (with all three districts sharing the expenses) providing summer transition math programs taking incoming 9th grade students and teachers and bringing them onto the high school campus for an introduction to high school and a review of needed math skills. Such programs can exist within the current design of the districts.

Academic accountability has changed dramatically since the districts involved in this issue were established. As a high school district, we are held accountable for our students’ academic performance as of their third semester or sophomore year. The current system

of three districts does not allow for the consistent, coordinated curriculum and instruction model that should support high stakes accountability.

The district is held accountable for the students AIMS scores, graduation and dropout rates, ect. Agua Fria Union High School District teachers and schools have performed well with school labels in the Performing, Performing Plus and Excelling categories.

The following issues persist and impede the consistent flow of curriculum and learning:

Elementary and union high school districts can maintain informal, formal or inter-governmental agreements on many of these issues. Many unified districts do not provide the items on this list. All of these items can be accomplished using the current district configuration.

1. There is not a seamless transition of students from 8th grade to 9th grade. As an example, different promotion/retention philosophies exist between the elementary and high school districts.
2. There is no common literacy philosophy or program among the three districts.
3. There is no common philosophy or set of practices that exist in the areas of Special Education or English Acquisition Programs.
4. There is no common philosophy or program that supports the teaching and learning of mathematics.

This occurs in unified, union and elementary districts. There are also examples of union and elementary districts that share curriculum across the 8th-9th grade years in the area of mathematics.

5. There is no sharing of resources for Special Education or other categorical programs.
6. There is no common student information system. Seamless transfer of student information is non-existent.
7. The three districts do share the same state standards, but not the same scope and sequence of the teaching of the standards.

The scope and sequence of the Arizona State Standards is laid out by grade level. The standards taught in third grade are the same across the state; the standards taught in 8th grade are the same across the state. This is what allows the state to give the AIMS assessment throughout the entire span of grades. Each school district must attest to their following of these grade articulated standards on a yearly basis. All three districts have done this at recent board meetings.

There is too much at stake to continue on our current path.

There is too much at stake to blindly go into this as is noted in the number of unanswered questions. The biggest question is, does unification promise to increase the achievement of our already successful schools. Then answer is no. There is no data to support that at the end of 12th grade that kids in unified

districts do any better than in union high school districts. Look at Millennium High School, an Excelling school!

It is essential for the academic success of all students that our high school district exist in a cohesive, aligned K-12 system with continuous high stakes accountability.

As with any controversial issue, you may be hearing many statements that sound like fact, but are actually opinion or conjecture. You may hear statements such as:

- **“Financial resources will be redistributed”**

(Same response as given above- What would it cost in the short run?)

- **“Many teachers and other employees will be reassigned”**
- **“No one will receive a raise for many years”**

(Same response as given above- How would the Career Ladder program be affected?)

- **“Title monies will be redistributed to other parts of the district”**

Federal Title I funds require that students and schools with the greatest needs be given priority in funding and programs concerning Title I funds. There is no doubt that funds will shift based on the schools that have the most needs in the new district.

Other requirements within NCLB also require that districts allow for students that attend a school that has been labeled as underperforming to attend any other district school. These students must be given first priority in selecting another school and they must be bussed at the districts expense using these Title funds.

- **“The current configuration of schools will be disrupted”**
- **“All the resources will first go to the high schools”**

This may actually be the opposite with the Title I funds mentioned above. Most unified school districts spend very little Title I money at the high school level. Currently Agua Fria Union High School District receives an allotment of funds that are dedicated to the high schools.

Statements such as these are overreactions and scare tactics used to push personal agendas. Should you choose to investigate them, you will find that there is no parallel research to support them. It is my opinion that if unification passes, it is unlikely that any swift decisions would be made. It is more likely that the transition would be slow and spread out over many years.

State law dictates the timeline. If this issue is passed, the districts will operate independently until July 1, 2010 (this date was modified from the original legislation which was July 1, 2009). At this time the districts must operate as a unified district. The district will have to comply with state law timelines to ratify a

budget within their legal limits. The new board will be faced with many of these decisions immediately. What will they do with teacher salaries, freeze them or balance?

There are many excellent K-12 models throughout Arizona and the United States. The teachers and staff members of these districts do an excellent job and they focus on the same issues of improving student learning that we do.

There are also many excellent Elementary and Union High School districts and we live right in the middle of both.

It is my recommendation to the staff and faculty of the Agua Fria Union High School District that you explore the information available, think carefully about the issues, and make an independent decision.

Please follow Mr. Butts' recommendation and look at some of the research and information that is available and is cited in this response. In this response you have been provided with the "parallel research" that does exist and has been made available for some time.

***One additional point that is also supported by documentation is the misperception or misrepresentation of what the law says concerning the future of unification. There is no part of the law that states that all districts must unify by a certain date. Though this argument was not presented in this memo, employees of the district have told this to parents and community members in many different venues. The act responsible for the redistricting commission and the unification proposal before us states in section 4, "If a majority of the qualified electors in any one of the affected school districts fails to approve the unification plan, the school district shall not become part of a unified school district." This act also has what is termed as a sunset clause, this means that the act repeals on a specific date. This law and the commission that were created by it are repealed on December 31, 2008. The law states, "Section 3 of this act, relating to the school district redistricting commission, and section 4 of this act, relating to unification approval, are repealed from and after December 31, 2008." Read the law for yourself at**

<http://www.azleg.state.az.us/FormatDocument.asp?inDoc=/legtext/47leg/1R/laws/0191.htm>

(Note- there are two amendments to the law, the first dealt with mainly the makeup of the redistricting commission and their instructions. You can read this section of the amendment if you would like. It is buried starting on page 16 of the following bill.

<http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/48leg/1r/bills/sb1164c.pdf>

The second amendment changed the date that the districts would actually become unified in the event of the voters passing this proposal.

<http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/48leg/2r/bills/sb1443s.pdf>)

The District will certainly adjust to any decision made by the voters, and we will continue to keep student success as the focus of all decisions.

Please be assured that regardless of the outcome of the election, the Governing Board and the Agua Fria Union High School District administration will continue to value and support our employees in all circumstances.

Please do not hesitate to email or call me with any questions you may have on this subject.

DWB/ch