

School Consolidation: Weighing Risks, Costs, and Options

During times of limited capital resources, consolidation of schools is an option worth considering.

By Tina Stanislaski, AIA, LEED AP



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Massachusetts's Tahanto School District combined the regional middle and high schools into a new 560-student building.

School administrators in the seaside community of Winthrop, Massachusetts, encountered a series of obstacles when they began planning for the future of the town's two largest schools.

A feasibility study showed that repairing and renovating the high school, built in 1965, would be an expensive process with little or no benefit to student learning because of the structural constraints of the fortress-style building.

The same study also revealed that Winthrop's aging junior high school, built in two phases in 1959 and in

the early 1970s, was close to reaching the end of its life cycle. The densely settled town had an added challenge: no buildable sites existed to accommodate construction of two new schools.

Asking the Right Questions

The decisions that the Winthrop community faced are not unusual. Surplus facilities, declining or increasing enrollments, obsolete school buildings, the high cost of construction, and the scarcity of land are familiar issues

that lead districts to consider a consolidation strategy.

Consolidating a junior high or middle school with a high school, which places students of such varying ages together, is a controversial concept for any community accustomed to operating separate schools with distinctly different cultures and teaching methods.

When making decisions about consolidation, begin with five key questions:

- What are the alternatives available to resolve the challenges we face?
- From the available alternatives, which options will provide the best learning environments and greater education benefits for every student?
- What are the realistic cost and timeline issues?
- Is there a hidden risk in consolidation?
- Is there a hidden opportunity to create something much more beneficial and efficient?

An honest, open dialogue around those key questions leads to an objective assessment of the options.

Considering the Options for Integrating Age Groups

In an era of limited capital resources, consolidation of two schools is often high on the list of options. Yet it is an emotional topic for many reasons. Consolidation disrupts traditions and familiar school locations. Mixing two age groups and combining the different teaching modalities appropriate for each group in one school are a universal concern for parents, teachers, and school officials.

The two biggest considerations in weighing consolidation are quality and cost. If the analysis of the options demonstrates cost savings and education quality advantages, school systems can benefit from applying emerging best practices and models for successful integration. Those practices and models will help



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A bridge connects the middle school and high school areas at Tahanto Regional Middle High School.

inform the process and provide a creative path forward.

By far the biggest consideration when combining schools is designing an appropriate solution for the wide mix of ages inside the new school. Combining a high school and a junior high or middle school means the spaces need to address entirely distinctive learning environments. Students in middle school and junior high do not move around the building as much; teachers are more likely to come to them, or they stay within team areas. In high schools, there is more of a need for mobility, independent study spaces, and a campus feel.

What characteristics of school culture and teaching methods need to be retained?

Resolving those contrasting needs requires a review of how each school operates. What characteristics of school culture and teaching methods need to be retained? Talking with teachers, staff, and students reveals those cultural and educational priorities.

Separate Wings, Shared Main Street Commons

When Massachusetts's Tahanto School District combined the regional middle and high schools into a new 560-student building, a priority for the stakeholders of both schools was to continue a small-school intimacy. The solution for their consolidation was to create two distinct schools within a new building.

The two schools have separate entrances and identities, with the added benefit of integration to share amenities and reduce operational costs. Shared public spaces (Figure 1) include a media lab, dining commons, library, music suite, and gymnasium. The shared spaces are located along a community "Main Street," while the classrooms are divided into separate middle school and high school wings.

Full Integration

Boston Latin School, the nation's oldest public school and a consistently top-ranked exam school, integrates grades 7–12 in a single building with 2,400 students sharing the school's auditorium, library,

cafeteria, gymnasium, and music rooms. Seventh-grade homerooms are clustered on one floor.

At the Roeper School in Detroit, with 360 students enrolled in grades 7–12, there is little separation of physical facilities. Students share dining, library, and community spaces as an extension of the school’s culture. The overlap in ages and uses is an intentional part of everyday life at this small independent school.

Separation by Middle and High School Zones

For the combined middle school and high school in Winthrop, the design program features a distinct zone within the building for each school, while providing flexible spaces to accommodate blended educational experiences. Separate entrances, cafeterias, science labs, and administrative offices are key parts of the design and program layout. Each school has its own learning commons with hands-on project spaces for students to work independently and collaboratively.



Figure 1. Example of Shared Public Spaces

The gymnasium, auditorium, library, and kitchen are shared, and a central storage facility and loading dock serve both schools.

The 189,500-square-foot Winthrop Middle/High School is being built on the site of the town’s former high school. When it opens in September 2016, it will serve 970 students in grades 7–12.

Calculating Cost Savings

Consolidation provides significant savings in initial costs—design, construction, and furnishings—and in avoided operational costs achieved throughout the school building’s life cycle. Constructing one building instead of two, even when a larger building is required, is a much-reduced capital outlay for communities to bear. Purchasing, preparing, operating, and maintaining one site obviously deliver considerable savings.

Each school has its own learning commons with hands-on project spaces for students to work independently and collaboratively.

In addition, a single mechanical, heating, ventilating, and air conditioning system; one commercial kitchen; one gymnasium or auditorium; and a single technology

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system combine to provide dramatic reductions in the initial costs and ongoing operation and maintenance outlay.

An often-overlooked saving is found in transportation. By having a single destination, bus routes can be designed with a more streamlined pick-up and drop-off program, with all roads leading to a single school.

Often, the cost of repair and renovation for the two facilities is more than building one new combined facility.

To calculate a cost comparison, review the cost of “repairing” the two separate existing school facilities. “Repair” means replacing all of the outdated systems, such as mechanical, electrical, and plumbing, and bringing the building up to meet life safety codes as well as the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Often, the cost of repair and renovation for the two facilities is more than building one new combined facility.

Delivering Educational Benefits

The learning and social advantages of consolidating schools across a wide range of ages and abilities are some of the outcomes evident in recent integrations. Bringing multiple resources under one roof increases the

educational experience and opens up new opportunities for tutoring and mentoring.

For example, many of the consolidated schools provide transitional spaces, often located where separate entities come together, where a mix of older and younger students can take a class together, work on “maker” projects, or learn how to produce videos in a media lab.

Teachers in the consolidated facilities share knowledge and connect with peers across grade levels to talk about individual students who may need a more challenging math class or who are advanced learners ready to move to a classroom with older students.

In many schools, older students serve as role models for the younger ones. The presence of older students, much like having older siblings at home, can introduce a worldlier, diverse environment and discourage intramural behaviors such as bullying.

Consolidation is a big step for communities to take. By objectively reviewing all options, studying the experience of other school systems, and carefully designing spaces that meet both integration and separation protocols, school administrators can create cost-conscious, high-quality learning environments for their communities.

Tina Stanislaski, AIA, LEED AP, is a senior associate with HMFH Architects of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Email: tstanislaski@hmfh.com

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