

**NOTE: THIS RECOMMENDATION WAS
ACCEPTED AND APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY
BY THE VALDOSTA-LOWNDES COUNTY
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BOARD OF
DIRECTORS AT A
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING ON DEC. 2, 2008**

School System Study

Report to the Board of Directors
Valdosta - Lowndes County Chamber of
Commerce

Prepared by the Task Force to Study the Impact
of School System Organization on Economic
Development in Our Community

11/25/2008

A recommendation based on an independent study conducted to determine the impact of school system organization on economic development and quality job growth, with appropriate action taken by the Chamber Board of Directors once the study is completed.

*Study to Determine the Impact of School System Organization on Economic
Development in Our Community
November 2008*

Background

In January 2008, the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce created a School System Study Task Force to:

- (1) Determine the possible links, if any, between school system organization and economic development, and
- (2) Make recommendations to the full Chamber Board on issues related to school system organization and economic development in the community.

As part of this process, the Task Force contracted with The Carl Vinson Institute (CVIOG) at the University of Georgia to conduct a review of the academic and public domain literature and a survey of site selection professionals, communities in Georgia that have undertaken school unification, and communities similarly situated to Valdosta-Lowndes County that have not unified. While the majority of the individuals surveyed indicated a preference (from an economic development perspective) for a unified school system, the study was inconclusive on the direct correlation between unification and economic development benefits. Essentially, the study concluded that while unification may be one of many tools the community uses to improve education, unification alone is not likely to solve the educational problems in Valdosta-Lowndes County.

In addition to work done by CVIOG, the Task Force reviewed studies conducted on our behalf by Dr. Cindy Tori, Economist at VSU, as well as extensive dialogue with David Rusk an author, speaker and consultant on urban policy and a national authority on community unification. Mr. Rusk is a National Strategic Partner of the Gamaliel Foundation. The Task Force also met with Dr. Jessie Register, Senior Advisor for District Leadership at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University. Dr. Register was also the superintendent at three public school systems as they went through the unification process, the last of which was Chattanooga/Hamilton County, Tennessee.

In addition to the CVIOG study and conversations with other knowledgeable experts, the Task Force also reviewed numerous books and publications on school unification written over the last 50 years across America.

Feedback from the Community

In addition to the above, the Task Force hosted a community wide “town hall meeting” to get feedback on the report from CVIOG. The Task Force also made the study available to the community on the Chamber’s Web site and a summary was sent out to a number of organizations, the two school superintendents, school boards and leaders throughout the community to solicit input. The recommendation from the Task Force

takes into consideration the feedback and comments from the community, as well as numerous written comments received after their review of the study.

Task Force

The Task Force was made up of 8 members who are some of the most respected men and women in our community. The Task Force met on numerous occasions during this 11 month period with a commitment to understand this very complex topic and served tirelessly to come to the Chamber Board with their best judgment on what school system organization has an economic development and quality job growth. Task Force members are: Minister Leroy Butler, Mr. Roy Copeland, Mr. Joe Cordova, Ms. Carolyn Eager, Mr. Rusty Griffin, Mr. Walter Hobgood, Mr. John Manning and Mr. J.C. Riley.

Executive Summary of the Study

1. *Based on the study and the survey of Chamber members, there appears to be a very strong consensus among business site selectors, business executives in peer communities, and Valdosta-Lowndes Chamber members that a unified school system is perceived (by themselves and others) as 'better'.*
2. *There is little, if any, cost benefit to unification of two school systems the size of Valdosta City and Lowndes County; a minimal long-term savings is possible.*
3. *The Task Force concludes that the current graduation rates and AYP status of both systems are unacceptable to the business community.*
4. *Unification is not a 'silver bullet' and will not in and of itself 'fix' the problem of unacceptable graduation rates and AYP status; a number of interrelated initiatives exist that could have a tremendous positive impact on these issues, and that could benefit from greater involvement of the business community include but are not limited to:*
 1. *Socioeconomic integration at an early stage on a school level*
 2. *Consideration of inclusionary zoning and other measures that increase neighborhood integration*
 3. *Increased parental involvement*
 4. *Additional mentoring and early intervention*
 5. *Helping our schools achieve AYP at all levels, but particularly at the high school level*
5. *Based on the survey of Chamber members:*
 1. *There is a strong perception among the local business community that the perceived comparative quality of our two school systems is affecting real estate sales and rentals.*
 2. *If the decision to continue with two school systems or to unify our school systems was purely a decision for the business community to make, the decision would be to unify our schools.*

Myths that exist around School System Consolidation

1. Consolidation would save taxpayers money.

Extensive research shows that consolidation is not likely to result in cost savings to taxpayers.

2. Consolidation by itself would improve graduation rates.

Research estimates that if Valdosta High School and Lowndes High School were mirrors of each other racially, VHS's graduation rate would increase very slightly, and LHS's graduation rate would decrease very slightly, resulting in a very slight overall increase (.4%) in the graduation rate. While this may be a great first step, it is not a "silver bullet". Many things must be done to increase graduation rate, test scores and AYP.

3. Consolidation would improve school performance and test scores.

The majority of the research indicates that minority and economically disadvantaged students perform better in schools that are more balanced socioeconomically. However, unification alone will not solve educational problems in Valdosta and Lowndes County.

4. Consolidation would help reduce racial segregation in the City of Valdosta's neighborhoods.

It was difficult to determine if this is the case, as the computation of "segregation indices" is complicated, as Census block boundaries change from one Census year to the next.

5. Our current school system organization is discouraging good industries from locating in our community; consolidation would help.

There is anecdotal evidence of prospective industries that were discouraged by what appeared to them as two segregated school systems, but no specific example is available. Our research found that industrial site selectors strongly favor a unified system over two school systems, all other variables being equal.

6. School consolidation would "dumb down" the better students in a more socioeconomically balanced environment.

There is little empirical evidence that this would take place. If managed and other interrelated educational initiatives taken, the average outcomes could improve.

Good Reasons to Unify School Systems in Valdosta and Lowndes County

1. A better educated work force will help attract and retain industry and businesses that create more and higher paying jobs in our community. Simplification and unification are more attractive to the business community.
2. Ability to build a unified community identity and vision for comprehensive educational initiatives to improve graduation rates, AYP, test scores, life skills and more successful children. It may not be the only answer, but it will likely be a catalyst for educational change.
3. To get the school demographics aligned with the community demographics.
4. The majority of the research indicates that minority and economically disadvantaged students perform better in schools that are more balanced socioeconomically. High school graduates earn \$6,605/year more than non-graduates.
5. Likely financial assistance is available for new facilities and renovation of older facilities from the State of Georgia.
6. Unification would assure equal tax funding for all students in the community and equal sharing of the property tax burden in support of education.
7. Based on surveys of communities that have unified their school districts over the last 20 years the vast majority of the community leaders are pleased with the decision.
8. Lower performing schools attract fewer and fewer families with resources, which often affects the quality of schools and further creates a vicious downward cycle.

Task Force Recommendations and next steps:

That our entire community embark on a journey to improve graduation rates (and positively impact workforce readiness and availability) from the current level of below average in the state of Georgia to the top 10% in the United States. This journey would focus on the well-being of all citizens and students with emphasis on achieving improvements in socioeconomic and racial integration in our schools.

To that end we recommend:

1. That the Chamber take the position that current graduation rates and AYP status for both systems is unacceptable.
2. That the Chamber support school system unification with changes in enrollment zones as an initial step in the process to increase graduation rates in Valdosta and Lowndes County from 66% to greater than 80% within seven years.
3. That our community establish a Community Public Education Foundation to focus on the following:
 - a. Work with School Boards and Administrators and other community leaders, to develop a plan for improving graduation rates and racial and socioeconomic integration including school unification.
 - b. Help identify and fund external (expert) resources that can assist both school systems in this effort.
 - c. Help identify resources in the business community to assist in the implementation of these plans.
 - d. Give leadership to a referendum so the citizens of the City of Valdosta are given an opportunity to vote on a plan to improve graduation rates that would include unification over the next 1-2 years.
 - e. Communicate the benefits of unification during the referendum process.
 - f. Develop a transitional plan toward unification with and provide support for both school systems. Transition would likely take 2-4 years. Provide them expert and staff support as requested.
 - g. Raise supplemental funds to support the Board of Education, the Superintendent and the district on educational improvement progress.
 - h. Assist or lead efforts to tap into government and private foundation grants to fund the transitional implementation and establishment of centers of excellence within the school system.