



The Impact of Arkansas' Act 60 Consolidation

on African-American School Leadership
and Racial Composition of School Districts

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for Advocates for Community and Rural Education¹**

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Summary

This report examines the impact of Arkansas' Act 60 on the racial composition of the student population, elected school boards, and administrative leadership of 27 districts affected by consolidations involving one or more districts with an African-American majority.

Act 60 mandated annexation or consolidation of all districts with less than 350 students. This act affected 99 districts—57 districts closed and 42 districts received students from the closed districts. Twenty-seven of these districts had a majority African-American student population, or were combined with such a district. The analysis of these 27 districts indicates that:

1. In just over half of these 27 districts, the student racial composition, *at the district level*, is more racially balanced after consolidation. However, for the vast majority of *students* (80%) in these districts, racial composition in the new consolidated districts is similar to that in their districts prior to consolidation.
2. Regardless of race, the numbers of citizens serving on school boards (from both closed and receiving districts) has been substantially reduced.
3. The number of elected African-American school board members has been decreased by 55% overall, especially in closed districts (by 71%), but in receiving districts as well (by 22%).
4. The number of districts with African-American majority school boards fell from 11 of the pre-consolidated districts to two of the resulting combined districts.
5. Five of six African-American administrators in the 27 affected districts lost their position as a result of Act 60. The number of African-American superintendents in Arkansas has fallen by 23% as a result of Act 60 (from 22 to 17).

The Affected Districts

Under Arkansas Act 60, 57 small districts were mandated to consolidate. This act, passed in early 2004, required "administrative consolidation" of all districts with a student enrollment of less than 350.

These small districts were given approximately two months to find a partner district and submit a request for a "voluntary" consolidation. The combined districts had to result in a total enrollment of 350 or more students. These consolidations needed to be approved by the State Board of Education. Districts that failed to find their own consolidation

partner by the deadline were assigned district partners with which to consolidate. The State Board of Education made these assignments. In this report, we refer to districts required by law to either voluntarily consolidate or be forced to consolidate as “closed” districts.

Of the 57 closed districts, all but two are located in rural areas (defined as communities with a population of 2,500 or less).² Those two are located in suburban areas.

The number of districts affected by the Act 60 consolidations is not limited to these 57 small districts, however. Forty-two districts that have “received” these closed districts are also affected.³ Counting these receiving districts, a total of 99 districts, nearly one-third of the districts in the state at the time Act 60 was passed, have experienced some type of administration/governance change under the Act.⁴

African-American Majority Districts⁵

Of these 99 affected districts, 27 were involved (either as closing or receiving districts) in a consolidation in which at least one of the districts had an African-American majority student population.

This group of 27 includes:

- 11 African-American majority districts that were closed
- 7 African-American majority districts that are receiving districts
- 3 White majority districts that were closed and combined with at least one African-American majority district
- 6 White majority districts that received at least one African-American majority district

This report summarizes how consolidation has changed the racial composition of the student population, school boards, and administrative leadership of these districts.

I. Student Racial Composition in the New Combined Districts

Forty-seven percent of the students enrolled in these 27 districts at the time of consolidation are African American. Eighteen districts were African-American majority and nine were White majority.

Consolidation produced 13 new, combined districts. Seven of these 13 districts currently have an African-American majority student population and six have a White majority student population.

I. Changes for closed districts.

Eleven districts with student populations that were African-American majority were mandated to close. Six of these districts became part of combined districts with a White

majority. The other five became part of combined districts with an African-American majority.

Three White majority districts closed. Of these, two entered combined districts with an African American majority and one entered a combined district with a White majority.

2. Changes for receiving districts.

One of the receiving districts went from African-American majority to White majority status (McGehee) after consolidation. One went from White majority to African-American majority status (Clarendon). In both cases, the percentage shift in the racial composition of student population was less than 20 percentage points.

3. Racial balance.

About half of the new consolidated districts are more racially balanced than member districts were prior to consolidation. (Here we define a state of "racial balance" as 50% African American and 50% White student enrollment.)

Fourteen of these 27 districts are now part of consolidated districts where the combined student enrollment is closer to a racial balance of 50-50 than pre-consolidation. One district has moved further from a 50-50 balance. The other 12 districts have experienced minimal or no change in racial composition through consolidation. We define a "minimal" change as one where the student racial composition of the new combined district is less than 10 percentage points different than the pre-consolidation composition.

Examining the number of affected students in these districts indicates less of a shift toward racial balance. Only 16.9% of the more than 23,000 students in the affected districts are part of consolidated districts that are more racially balanced than their previous district. Only 540 students now attend a new district that is substantially less racially balanced. (Augusta City went from being a small African-American majority to a two-thirds African American majority when it merged with Cotton Plant.) Over 80% of the students in affected districts attend schools in consolidated districts with minimal or no change in racial composition from that of their prior district. Thus, while there is some movement toward increased racial balance on a district level, most students will find their new combined district to be not much different, in terms of racial composition, than their previous district.

In spite of some progress towards racial balance, most of these districts are still primarily African American or White. In eight of the 13 new combined districts, the racial imbalance is still 20% or greater.⁶ Also, note that these are district level demographic data. Until the new combined districts decide which schools to leave open and which, if any, to close, it is impossible to predict school-level racial composition.

The chart below summarizes these changes.

Changes in Student Racial Composition Due to Consolidation

	Number of Students Affected	Number of Districts		TOTALS
		Closed	Receiving	
More Racially Balanced after Consolidation	3,914* (16.9%)	12**	2	14
Less Racially Balanced after Consolidation	540 (2.3%)		1	1
Minimal or No Change in Racial Composition (Increase or decrease of African American enrollment of less than 10 percentage points.)	18,673 (80.7%)	2	10	12
TOTALS	23,127	14	13	27

**That is, 3,914 students in these 27 districts are now part of a consolidated district that is more racially balanced than the district they were part of, prior to consolidation.*

***That is, 12 closed districts are now part of new combined districts that are more racially balanced than they were prior to consolidation.*

II. Impact on African-American School Board Representation

We also examined the impact of the consolidation of these districts on school boards. The impacts here are more evident.

1. Less representation overall.

Prior to consolidation, there were 154 school board members serving these 27 districts. Seventy-four served districts that closed and 80 served receiving districts (154 total). The 13 combined districts now have 90 board seats. This represents a 42% drop overall in board representation for the citizens in these 27 districts.

2. Fewer African American board members overall.

Fifty-one of the 74 board members (69%) serving the closed districts prior to their consolidation were African American. Twenty-three of the 80 board members (29%) serving the receiving districts prior to consolidation were African American. Thus, prior to consolidation, 74 of the 154 board members (48%) serving these 27 districts were African American.⁷

After consolidation, 33 of the 90 board members (37%) serving the combined districts are African American. This represents a 55% drop in the number of African-American officials representing the citizens of these 27 affected school districts (from 74 to 33).

3. Fewer African-American board members from both closed and receiving districts.

This drop in representation is not proportional between closing and receiving districts as measured by the residence of the 33 current African-American board members. Of these 33, only 15 are residents in the districts that were closed. These 15 constitute a 71% drop in African-American representation for the citizens of the closed districts (from 51 to 15).

But receiving districts also lost African-American school board representation. Eighteen African Americans currently serve on one of the new combined school boards and live in a receiving district. This constitutes a 22% decline in African-American representation from pre-consolidation levels in these districts (from 23 to 18).

4. Many fewer school boards with African American majorities.

The change in board majorities was even larger. Prior to consolidation, 10 of 14 closed districts had African-American majority boards. One receiving district (Stephens) had an African-American majority. Of the 13 combined districts after consolidation, two have African-American majority boards, one of which (Stephens-McNeil) was formed from a consolidation of two African-American majority boards that resulted in a net loss of three African-American elected officials. Only the Augusta-Cotton Plant annexation resulted in a shift from a White majority board in the receiving district (Augusta), to an African-American majority board in the combined district.

The chart below summarizes these changes.

Changes in African American School Board Representation Due to Consolidation

Board Members	Closed Districts	Receiving Districts	Closed and Receiving Districts	Combined Districts	Percent Change
	Pre-Consolidation			Post-Consolidation	
Total # of School Board Members	74	80	154	90	-42%
# of African-American School Board Members	51	23	74	33	-55%
Percent African-American Board Members	69%	29%	48%	37%	-24%
# of African-American Board Members From These Areas, Post-Consolidation	15	18	NA	NA	NA
% Change in African-American Representation From These Areas, Post-Consolidation	-71%	-22%	NA	NA	NA

III. African American Superintendents

This decline in African-American board leadership is mirrored in the impact of consolidation on African-American superintendents. Prior to consolidation, there were 22 African-American superintendents in Arkansas, about 7% of the superintendents in the state. Six of these were in districts forced to close. Five of these six African-American superintendents have lost their leadership positions in the combined districts.

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² That is, districts located in communities designated as locale code 7 or 8 by the National Center for Education Statistics.

³ In this analysis, a "receiving" district is a district that has incorporated one or more of the closed districts, forming a "new" combined district. In several instances, two or more of the closed districts combined to form a new district; in these cases there is no "receiving" district.

⁴ Closed districts could be "annexed" or "consolidated" with a receiving district. Act 60 treats these two configurations slightly differently, mainly around requirements for re-zoning and school board membership. An annexation allows the receiving district to maintain its original school board and merely add one additional school board member from the closed district at least until re-zoning. Also re-zoning is only necessary for annexed districts if previously one of the member districts was operating under the federal Voting Rights Act. A consolidated district was required to re-zone almost immediately, could only have seven school board members, and was required to hold new elections for all school board members by the next upcoming September elections. Twenty-nine of the closed districts were annexed and 28 were consolidated. We refer throughout this paper to both annexations and consolidations as "consolidations."

⁵ "African-American majority" districts are defined as districts where African American students comprise 50% or more of the total student population. All demographic data is from the National Center for Educational Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), 2002-2003.

⁶ Here "racial imbalance" is calculated as the percentage of one race minus the percentage of the other race.

⁷ Information about the numbers of past and current school boards, their race and their residence was obtained directly from superintendents, or other knowledgeable district officials, in the each of the affected districts.