

## IS IT TIME TO BREAK UP THIS MONSTER? (Draft op. ed. or Opinion Piece) PULL OUT CITY SCHOOLS AND REPLACE WITH San Diego Unified.

By John de Beck, San Diego City Board of Education.

Recently the San Diego School District Board of Education filed a report with the San Diego County of Education. This report requires that the district certify the soundness of its budget for the next few years.

The Board of Education used assumptions in this report that gambled the district's solvency on a series of yet-to-be-decided state-wide votes and incomplete teacher negotiations and the effectiveness of an early retirement plan. If any of these assumptions do not come to pass; then the district is probably going to be insolvent. This alone should make the community edgy about letting the current board manage the educational future of their children,

But there are other reasons to be concerned! In the process of attempting to control the affairs of the district, the School Board has made massive and crippling cuts to programs that help kids succeed. They have gutted specialized music and gifted programs that raise achievement for the best and brightest of our children; they have done away with funds schools were saving for music programs.

While the state budget crisis is not of the making of this school board, the decisions they make should represent the will of the public and allow for cuts to be made by people close to the kids, not central bureaucrats.

This union sponsored board, ignored the chance to furlough employees, and completely ignored savings in summer school, freshman sports and in military training

Not bound by labor support and fully informed by their community educational leaders, it is highly likely that entirely different decisions would have been made.

However, there is an organizational decision that can be made to support local school control. It would require a split of the school district into manageable parts. These separate districts would be legally defined by

the voters, and would allow the local election of community based board members from high school clusters. One possibility would be three-way split into a Coastal District, an Eastern District and a Southern District. Each of these districts could independently manage their financial affairs and decide the educational policies and practices for their children at the local level.

The advantages of making decisions close to the children is that real accountability for the school program would be with elected neighbors and not by city wide political powers. Breaking away from established bureaucrats would save millions. Actually deciding what happens is a powerful tool for communities and right sizing does not always require scale.

There are rules of course, and a new district cannot be designed to exclude socio-economic classifications or to contribute to segregation. It would not be acceptable to have a split defined by Highway 8, but what about a split at highway 5, Highway 94, or Highway 163? Of course, one criterion for County Office of Education approval would be the inclusion of students from throughout the district who currently attend the schools in the new district. Efforts to provide transfer-in opportunities should be supported, and charter school options should be encouraged as well.

So, I am calling for a Blue Ribbon Committee of people interested in developing plans for a new smaller and more efficient district from part of the San Diego City Schools. They would help design the particulars and review the information available on the benefits to their children of a smaller and more responsive school system that would use its resources more effectively. Some community leaders have already expressed an interest..

The present plan is to recruit people from various high school clusters, like Point Loma, Mission Bay, La Jolla, University City, and others to investigate this idea and formulate a ballot measure if that decision makes sense to them. When the cadre of volunteers has surfaced, I will arrange an information session and the group can choose their leadership. I have assembled volunteer experts who will assist the committee in their deliberations. Interested parties should identify themselves by email at [Jdebeck1@san.rr.com](mailto:Jdebeck1@san.rr.com) and indicate which high school cluster they would

represent. For additional questions, one can contact me at the same email address or call my home office (619 276 2027) and leave a message

### **Questions to de Beck:**

Why are you proposing this?

I have learned how unresponsive this district is to the community and its schools. It is clear that a better arrangement is to move decisions out to smaller high interest community groups. These are logically the high schools and their feeder schools. I call them Clusters.

What's in it for you?

The satisfaction that my community has found a way to make their schools as good now as they were when I went to school here. I will be in my 80's when this all comes to pass and would be glad to help, and the satisfaction of accomplishing a more responsive governance plan for our educational system would be a fine legacy. I am proud of the work that the Point Loma Cluster has done, and it is now to the point that it can be self sustaining and do more cluster management. I like to think I had some role in their success.

Can it all be done at once?

I don't think so. What is needed is some group to lead the way. If I can see a San Diego Coastal Unified created and running effectively, I think it would be easy for others to follow. Creativity is hard, but following a model is not as bad. I hope to help design the model.

Who will fight the idea?

I suspect the established bureaucracy, the unions, and those who don't like change or don't trust public management of schools. But the opposition will define itself by how it behaves when it sees how strong the movement for a split becomes. I expect opposition...all new ideas get challenged.

Are there any other splits of large districts to copy?

I don't think so. Los Angeles made some moves in this direction, but they found that the unfunded costs for retirement benefits (that a new district had to assume) became an unmanageable liability they didn't want to assume. We don't have many of these...yet. But if the current board grants too many special deals, we could face this problem. We also need to consider existing bond liabilities and search for deal breakers like the unfunded pension and benefits that killed the LA split.. We would get to split the assets and the liabilities. It could be a fight.

What does it take to do a split?

These are not in sequence: First, is a good plan. Second, a petition signed by 25% of the voters in the new district to place it on the ballot. Third, approval by the County Superintendent to place it on the ballot based on statutory requirements. And then, a vote in an official election with 51% approval. Looks like a Short list... but there is a rigorous County review and hard work for proponents...including the usual expenses of a political campaign.

Are there financial savings in a small district?

Sure, the extent of these depends on whether the district uses full-time employees and departments for short term activities. Does the board let schools contract for capital improvements or repairs? Or do they require the use of district employees? How about bus transportation? What about capital improvements or school renovations? Does a district require their own financial, curriculum, or staff development departments or can they use the services of the San Diego County Department of Education? The beauty of the small district is that the decisions on these matters are made as close to the schools that need the work as possible. A small district can use economy of scale, and also not engage a huge full time bureaucracy to accomplish what needs to be done. There can even be savings in special education or alternative education by making decisions close to the kids and using services as needed rather than tooling up for every special education need.

I can't quantify all of the savings, but I believe that a small district can be far more efficient than a huge one can. Nearby samples abound, and some charters are leading the way as well.

What about unions?

Public employees have the right to join unions and they will not be discouraged, but it seems clear that starting with a clean slate, and making meaningful negotiations would help improve the schools in a new district. As to pay, I would hope that the small new district(s) would pay more than the surrounding districts do. We want the best we can afford. Most of the employees at the time of the split would remain, and changes would occur as retirements or resignations emerged. Much of this would require negotiation with whatever unions get certified by PERB.

What about taxes?

Existing taxes at the time of the split would probably apply, but the negotiations may allow decisions about them. I could see a carefully managed district that could reduce taxes over time. For example it might be a good idea for the new district to abolish a tax, or to ask for a new one, or both. What matters is the control is with the people near to the schools.