

Report on Collocated Schools  
for the  
Select School Facilities Committee  
Wyoming State Legislature

Submitted by:

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## **1.0 PREFACE**

This report is a product of the Wyoming State Legislature 2004 Laws, Chapter 108, Section 402(c) which directed the Select Committee to review the treatment of collocated schools under the small school adjustment of the same act and the school facility adequacy standards established by the Wyoming School Facilities Commission.

### **1.1 Statement of the Issue**

Historically, Wyoming school districts have been able to choose both the grade configuration and location of their schools. A national review of schools' grade level configurations reveals that, typically, elementary schools are comprised of grades K-5 or K-6, middle schools or junior high schools include some combination of grades 5-9, and high schools include grades 9-12. Elementary, middle or junior high and high schools usually are located at different sites.

Due to the demographics of Wyoming, small populations spread over large geographic areas, some variations of the grade configurations described above have been instituted to meet unique local needs. Common examples include the K-8 school, the 6-12 school, and the K-12 school. Another consequence of the demographics and of the educational programs in the state has been the collocation of separate schools on the same site. It is not uncommon to see an elementary and junior high school, or a junior high and a high school sharing the same site and, at times, the same building.

Currently, there are two state funding mechanisms which take into consideration school size. The Education Resource Block Grant Model which determines operational funding employs a small school adjustment. This adjustment recognizes the diseconomies of operating small schools by increasing funding for staffing. In addition, the Wyoming School Facilities Commission has established statewide school building and facility adequacy standards or design guidelines which outline the types, number, and sizes of spaces that adequate schools should contain. These guidelines include a bottom line measure of gross square feet per student which is typically larger for smaller school populations, recognizing the economies of scale that larger populations provide. These guidelines come into play when the Commission is determining whether an existing facility is educationally suitable, or if the design of a new facility is appropriate.

The fact that school districts are able to configure similarly sized school populations differently can affect their level of funding. For instance, if school district A has 200 students in a K-8 school, it would receive one small school adjustment. If school district B has a total of 200 students in a K-5 school and a 6-8 school, it would receive two small school adjustments. The question then becomes, is there some operational or educational justification for the different levels of funding?

The same situation can arise in regard to the school facility adequacy standards. Will the 200 students in District A require more or less square footage for an adequate facility than the combined square footage of the two collocated schools in District B?

## 1.2 Issues and Discussion

What is the definition of a school?

There does not appear to be an operational definition of a school. The school unit is effectively defined in terms of how it is accredited by the Wyoming Department of Education. In fact, there are school units consisting of a grade 5, grades K-2, grades 3-5, grades 5-6, and grade 7. These configurations can change from year to year depending on the population of the particular school.

There does not appear to be an administrative need for separate schools at the same location. There are approximately 28 sites with collocated schools. These 28 sites house 67 individual schools. Of these 67 schools, 56 share a principal with the other school located at the same site. Collocated schools which do not share a principal typically are larger than 150 students, but this is not true in every case.

It is well accepted that different grade levels will have different educational programs, different schedules, and different facility needs. This would appear to be the most logical reason for separating students of different grade levels into different schools at the same site. However, there are 11 schools in Wyoming which combine grade levels such as K-12, K-8, or 6-12. It is assumed that these schools, which will be called *combined schools* for the purposes of this paper, are fully accredited, offer the state required curriculum, and meet the needs of the different grade levels while organized as a single school unit.

Local school districts historically have had the ability to configure and locate their schools to best meet their students' needs, address the demographics of the districts, and optimize the local financial resources. The variation in school configuration and location may be due to local choice, circumstance, need and/or history.

How does the small school adjustment affect funding?

The small school adjustment to the educational resource block grant model is based largely on school size. Elementary schools with 263 students or less, middle schools with 299 students or less, and high schools with 599 students or less qualify for the adjustment. (*Note: there are other requirements for qualification, but size is the requirement that is key to this discussion.*) Based on 2003 enrollments, approximately 69% of elementary schools, 71% of middle schools, and 76% of high schools qualify for the small school adjustment.

Of the 67 collocated schools, only one does not qualify for the small school adjustment based on enrollment size. Of the 28 collocated school sites, only 3 (perhaps 4) would not qualify for a small school adjustment if the individual school units were identified as one school unit.

The following chart identifies the difference in funding as a result of the small school adjustment when it is applied to collocated and combined schools.

Comparison of Small School Adjustment for Collocated and Combined Schools

No. of Collocated School Sites	Total \$ Adjustment If Funded As One School	\$ per Student
28	\$8,090,530	\$1,493.82
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No. of Small Schools at Collocated Sites	Total \$ Adjustment If Funded as Separate Schools	\$ per Student
67	\$12,410,607	\$2,291.47
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No of Combined Schools	Total \$ Adjustment if Funded As One School	\$ per Student
11	\$3,430,922	\$1,686.11
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No of School Units at Combined Sites	Total \$ Adjustment if Funded As Separate Schools	\$ per Student
25	\$4,818,723	\$2,367.92

These data indicate that the collocated schools receive approximately 53% more funding (or about \$797 per student) when an adjustment is computed for each school at the site. Combined schools receive, on average, 40% less (or about \$682 per student) when they receive one adjustment per site. The following chart identifies the difference in funding per student per school level as generated by the small school adjustment for collocated schools and combined schools. (*Note: the small school adjustment, when applied to combined schools only uses the predominate school level to calculate the adjustment.*)

Comparison of Funding Per Student (ADM)

<b>Collocated Schools</b>		
No. of Elem. Students	Average \$ per Elem. Student	Range of \$ per Elem. Student
2,174	\$ 1,524.29	\$254 - \$5,390
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No. of MS Students	Average \$ per MS Student	Range of \$ per MS Student
1724	\$ 2,066.30	\$705 - \$8,368
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No. of HS Students	Average \$ per HS Student	Range of \$ per HS Student
1,412	\$ 3,920.24	\$1,724 - \$10,297
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<b>Combined Schools</b>		
No. of Students	Average \$ per Student	Range of \$ per Student
2,034	\$1,686.11	\$40 - \$3,511

These data indicate that there is a wide range of funding per student within the small school adjustment. This range is due, in large part, to the fact that the adjustment is affected by the total school population and whether the school is an elementary, middle, or high school. However, the range and the average funding per student are significantly lower in combined schools as compared to collocated schools.

What is the affect of school facility adequacy standards?

The Wyoming School Facility Guidelines, or school facility adequacy standards, identify prototypical models for schools of different sizes. The models identify the possible type, size and number of spaces that can be programmed into a new school facility and are applied to existing schools on an individual basis. The models have a bottom line measurement of the number of gross square feet (GSF) per student that is the maximum allowed for an adequate school. Typically, the GSF per student number increases as the school capacity decreases in recognition of the economies of scale.

The question then becomes, would collocated or combined schools be treated differently when the models are applied for the design of new facilities? The application of the models on existing schools to determine suitability is based more on the types of spaces present, recognizing that older buildings may have been inefficiently designed and may not meet the GSF per student bottom line. Consequently, this paper will only examine the effects of the guidelines on new facilities.

With the exception of the elementary school models, which include models as small as a one classroom school, the middle and high school models are not developed for schools with enrollments of less than 150 students. Designs for new schools with fewer than 150 students are reviewed on an individual basis using the models as a starting point. Consequently, in applying the guidelines to middle and high schools

smaller than 150 students, the 150 student models have been interpolated to arrive at an applicable model for smaller schools.

The following chart compares the maximum square footage that would be allowed under the design guidelines for schools at three collocated sites. The square footage is shown for each individual school, and then for one combined school.

Comparison of Gross Square Foot Allowances

School	Grades	Enrollment	GSF per Student	Total GSF
High School #1	9-12	75	547.1	41,033
Junior High School #1	7-8	40	580.88	23,235
Elementary School #1	K-6	149	182.63	27,212
Total		264	346.51	91,480
K-12 #1	K-12	264	281.23	74,245
<i>Difference</i>			<i>(65.28)</i>	<i>(17,235)</i>
High School #2	9-12	202	330	66,660
Middle School #2	6-8	161	295	47,495
Total		363	314.48	114,155
6-12 #2	6-12	363	255.76	92,841
<i>Difference</i>			<i>(58.72)</i>	<i>(21,314)</i>
Middle School #3	7-8	53	580.88	30,787
Elementary School #3	K-6	223	147.98	33,000
Total		276	231.11	63,786
K-8 #3	K-8	276	231	63,756
<i>Difference</i>			<i>(0.11)</i>	<i>(30)</i>

These data indicate that the combined schools would receive less square footage per student than three separate collocated schools. This is due, in large part, to the duplication of core facilities that would be provided at each individual school. Core facilities include the library, gym, cafeteria/auditorium, kitchen, etc.

However, in the actual application of the design guidelines, the Commission typically will recommend that smaller schools consolidate and share facilities. For instance, in the example of school #1 above, the recommendation would probably be to build a K-12 school so that the elementary, middle and high schools could share the core facilities, such as the gym, library and cafeteria/auditorium. This approach takes advantage of the economies of scale and provides quality facilities in a cost effective manner.

## 1.3 Observations

The lack of an operating definition for “a school” leaves the playing field wide open. At the same time, the demographics of Wyoming schools vary so much from district to district, and from year to year, it may be difficult to create a definition that is not restrictive or punitive.

In its current form, the small school adjustment to the education resource block grant model encourages districts to maintain collocated schools as independent school units. By doing so, each school unit receives a small school adjustment which currently amounts to approximately \$12.4 million statewide. At the same time, the Wyoming School Facilities Commission is encouraging schools to consolidate so that adequate facilities can be provided to all students in the most cost and resource effective manner. These two governmental forces are, at least sometimes, working against each other.

The fact that the majority of schools in the state receive a small school adjustment leads one to question the relevancy of the basic grant model. Typically, an effective model will encompass the majority of the population, with adjustments applied to the minority of situations falling outside the norm. Due to the fact that Wyoming’s schools are significantly smaller than the national norm, we have the model applying to a minority of the population, and the adjustment being applied to the majority of the situations.

There does not appear to be a clear educational advantage to having collocated schools over combined schools, or vice versa. It appears to depend on which educational approach the district believes is best for its students. Districts that have collocated schools typically choose to have a different approach in the middle school as compared to the high school, for example, and state that it is very important for each school to have its own identity as well as different programs, spaces, and schedules. At the same time, they value the ability to share resources, staff and facilities. However, the educational justification for separate schools does not necessitate a need for separate administrations because the majority of the existing collocated schools successfully utilize the same principal.

## 1.4 Areas for Further Investigation and Discussion

- I. Develop, if possible, an operating definition of a “school.” This will help guide educators, legislators and planners in the complicated area of school finance.
- II. Recalibrate the Education Resource Block Grant Model so that it more precisely reflects the characteristics of Wyoming schools. The result of this effort should create a model where a minority, rather than a majority, of schools require a small school adjustment. The lack of a financial incentive to remain separate school units at a collocated site, while still being adequately funded, should allow school administrators to organize school units in the most educationally and administratively advantageous manner.
- III. Consider a “small site adjustment” rather than a small school adjustment. This approach would follow the same logic as the small school adjustment, but recognize that schools collocated at the same site can administratively and logistically function as one fiscal unit. This approach will not encourage the continuation of unneeded school units but will still provide additional resources where the diseconomies of scale require it.

- IV. Consider offering incentives for schools to consolidate at one site. One opportunity might be to offer additional funding for special enrichment programs which enroll a minimum number of students or for schools with minimum enrollments. The minimum enrollment requirement would be logical since it is only cost effective to offer such programs when a minimum number of students can benefit. This approach is similar to the academic focus allocation in the prototypical models of the design guidelines. The amount of space allotted for the academic focus area in the models is a percentage of all other academic areas, and consequently increases in larger schools.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

There is clearly justification for providing small school units with additional funding to compensate for the diseconomies of scale. However, if the basic grant model more precisely reflects the characteristics of Wyoming schools, schools that receive this funding adjustment will be in the minority and not in the majority. The funding mechanisms for school operations and facility improvements should work in harmony toward the same goals.