



To collaborate is to better educate

By Stephen J. Adams

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We New Englanders are a pretty independent bunch. We like to be left alone, we don't team up on much. Although the commuter trains are used pretty heavily, many times more people drive by themselves to work within a few blocks of each other. Local control is the rule of the day.

Nowhere is this independence characteristic better displayed than in the way we organize our school system. Massachusetts has 351 cities and towns and no less than 377 school districts. This includes charter schools but does not include the 108 additional "non-operating" school districts that are so small that all of their students are sent to surrounding districts.

Every ten years or so, some crisis arises that causes us to pull together. Come the occasional blizzard, flood, ice storm, or hurricane, Massachusetts residents are known to open up to strangers, pull people's cars out of snowbanks, make temporary homes for displaced families, and contribute needed dollars or supplies.

At Pioneer Institute we highly value individual freedom and responsibility. But there are times when coming together to address a challenge makes eminent sense.

According to many mayors, education unions, and local school leaders, Massachusetts faces a new crisis. While most such emergencies have been visited on us by nature, the current trouble is of human origin — not enough money to pay all the school bills. If they believe their own crisis rhetoric, it may be time for school systems to pull together more aggressively to find a solution to the problem (besides lobbying for higher taxes). In a word — collaborate.

Educational collaboratives, or educational service agencies, are not new to Massachusetts. In fact, there are 32 such collaboratives. (In true New England fashion, this number is far higher than in comparable or even more populous states). But for the most part in most areas of school services, their utility as a money-saving way to provide better services is going unrealized.

An important exception, special education, points to the potential that educational collaboratives represent. In the Greater Lawrence area 10 school districts have banded together to provide special education services. Officials estimate that over 20 years of sharing special ed costs, the districts have saved at least \$13 million. This doesn't include the transportation savings and quality gains from having students closer to home instead of being sent to private schools. A study of Massachusetts special education collaboratives found savings of between 40 percent and 60 percent on tuitions alone.

In Minnesota, even more impressive results have been documented. In one year alone a collaborative in Southwestern Minnesota saved \$2.6 million on special ed expenses. This is 69 percent less than if services were purchased individually. Dr. M. Craig Stanley, executive director of the Greater Lawrence Educational Collaborative, thinks that Massachusetts schools can save millions of dollars by taking better advantage of collaboratives. Dr. Stanley was one of four winners of Pioneer Institute's [2003 Better Government Competition](#) feted last week. He clearly demonstrated how local school districts can band together to form educational collaboratives and take advantage of economies of scale to realize significant savings on joint procurement of support services.

Dr. Stanley suggests that by organizing all Massachusetts school districts into just 12—15 collaboratives and tightening up the law governing educational service agencies, enormous savings can be found. If experiences in other states are any guide, Stanley notes, collaboratives can produce savings of 33 percent in areas such as custodial services, training, recruitment, furniture, equipment, supplies, and cafeteria food. He estimates that even dropping the savings potential to just 10 percent could create annual savings of between \$49 million and \$165 million. Experience tells us that New Englanders do not give up local control easily. We are unlikely to embrace calls for regionalism around broad concepts like smart growth or other undefined ideas.

But a clear-cut and discrete activity, like joint purchase of school services, should fit nicely into the New England culture of self-sufficiency.

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