



Glenn Cook

The Long R



For the first time in several months, Frank Porter had reason to exhale. As the superintendent of California's new Twin Rivers Unified School District visited classrooms on July 1, the sense of relief was almost palpable.

"At times," Porter says, "this feels like the longest all-nighter I've ever had to pull to get ready for an exam."

The first day of the Twin Rivers unification, highlighted by almost 800 supporters attending a celebration outside the district's new central office, signaled the end of a long and difficult journey. Six previous attempts to consolidate the elementary and high school districts in northern Sacramento County had failed since the end of World War II.

Since November 2007, when 60 percent of voters approved the unification and elected a new seven-member school board, the consolidation process has occurred at a frenetic pace. In unifying the Rio Linda, North Sacramento, and Del Paso Heights elementary school districts with the Grant Joint Union

Scott Plotkin, executive director of the California School Boards Association and a former longtime member of the Rio Linda board. "I know of at least a dozen circumstances in the state where everyone agreed consolidation and unification was a good idea. This was not one of them. ... They have some real challenges ahead."

Effects of consolidation

Consolidation has presented challenges for school board members, administrators, and local control proponents for more than 100 years, but especially since the end of World War II. Seventy years ago, the nation had 117,000 school districts and 25.5 million students; today, the number is closer to 14,500 and 50 million, respectively.

With half of the nation's school districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students, and a tight economy pinching budgets, legislators in a number of states continue to eye consolidation as a

oad to Unity

After 60 years of animosity, four California school districts merge into one.
Can the consolidated Twin Rivers district look beyond history and become successful?

High School District, Twin Rivers' leaders have held community forums, negotiated union contracts, worked out a new budget, and put new logos on buses that were unveiled for summer school students when the merger took effect.

"Everyone involved from the very start knew this would be a lot of work," says Kathy Young, a parent who campaigned door-to-door for the unification last summer and fall. "There is great diversity in this district, a large landmass, and there are so many cultural issues. Some of our kids are very successful and many are not. So we knew even if everyone agreed to do this and got what they wanted that this was going to be a lot of work."

What few expected were the unintended but almost inevitable hurdles caused by decades of acrimony and the complex melding of four cultures into one. In the eight months between the vote and July 1, the new district's leaders faced a court battle over administrative buyouts, lingering financial questions about the construction of a \$159 million school, and continuing resentment among staff and board members in Grant and Rio Linda, the two largest former districts.

"There's a lot of hard feelings and a lot of bitterness," says

way to cut costs and provide expanded services to students who live in far-flung rural areas. On the heels of similar efforts in Arkansas and West Virginia earlier in the decade, Maine legislators in 2007 passed a law to cut the number of school districts from 290 to about 80 over the next several years.

Similar consolidation proposals have been or are being floated by state leaders in Alaska, Hawaii, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Vermont. And in November, taxpayers in 10 Arizona counties will decide whether to unify 120 school districts.

Research on the effects of school consolidation is scant, and most of what's available is more than a decade old. However, a 2007 Standard & Poor's study said the state of Pennsylvania could potentially save millions by consolidating districts with fewer than 500 students. Another 2007 study by Indiana University's Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) said mergers provide only limited savings to states and local taxpayers and, more important, have little to no impact on student achievement.

Terry Spradlin, CEEP's associate director for education policy, believes districts have "no compelling reasons to consoli-

date” if the intent is to raise achievement. “However,” he said when the study was released, “there is some research that says—for especially small and rural school districts—there are some economic benefits . . . but that’s really on a limited basis.”

California, like other states, has dangled economic carrots to promote unification, offering various financial incentives to districts that choose to consolidate. And, for the most part, it has worked. Immediately after World War II, the state had more than 4,000 school districts; the number now is fewer than 1,000.

“It’s a case-by-case judgment call,” Plotkin says. “It’s one of those things where in some cases it makes imminent sense from a financial perspective, but in some cases that advantage is diminished somewhat by issues of geography and political identity.”

Making the new district work

Twin Rivers gets its name from the two rivers—the Sacramento and the American—that frame the district’s southern border. But the perceived dividing line, at least economically, is on either side of Interstate 80. The southern end is on the outskirts of Sacramento, the state capital. To the north are the suburban and rural areas that border Sutter and Placer counties.

This mix of urban, suburban, and rural presents its own set of issues for the new district, which covers 120 square miles. When classes start in mid-August, 54 campuses will house approximately 30,000 students—a broad mix of white, Hispanic, African American, Asian, Russian, Ukranian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Filipino, and other ethnicities. Three of four students qualify for free or reduced-price meals; 30 percent are classified as English language learners.

The seven-member board, however, does not reflect the student diversity or the secondary school population. Three of the seven (Bob Bastian, Janis Green, and Michelle Rivas) come from the Rio Linda district, the most affluent and highest achieving of the four that merged. Two members (Linda Fowler and Roger Westrup) are from the former North Sacramento district. The only minority members—Alecia Eugene-Chasten and Cortez Quinn—have no previous board experience. Only Quinn, who ran unsuccessfully for the Grant board, has secondary school ties.

“This board is really going to be the focus of attention in how you merge four cultures together,” says James Shelby, president and chief executive officer of the Sacramento Urban League. “In all four districts, African-American and minority youth are still at the bottom of the educational ladder, so the question is, ‘How do you make this district work for everybody?’”

That question has been asked for decades, as relationships and politics between the elementary school districts and the Grant high school district became increasingly fractious.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Grant district was

beset by charges of corruption and favoritism, drugs, and gangs as student achievement fell to the lowest of any large district in Sacramento County. By the early 1990s, Grant’s reputation was so poor that charter schools were formed to serve middle and high school students. Today, the Twin Rivers district oversees three dependent charter schools; other independent charters are scattered throughout the area.

“It fragmented our community,” Young says. “People were pretty happy with the elementary district, but they were not happy with the high school, and there was a fear: What do I do when my child goes to the seventh grade?”

Parents in the Natomas elementary school district broke away rather than send their children to Grant and formed their own unified district in 1992. The pain was doubled when Natomas, located in one of the last undeveloped sections of Sacramento, saw upper middle class growth jump tenfold during the housing boom of the 1990s.

Bitter battles also emerged between administrators in the districts, with each side blaming the other for a growing achievement gap between younger and older students. Even though student achievement improved over time in Grant, it’s still among the lowest in Sacramento County, according to a July 2008 state report.

“The high school people were telling the elementary people that we were the cause of their low test scores,” says Fowler, who served on the North Sacramento board for 36 years and now chairs the Twin Rivers board. “It made me angry.”

Out of that anger and frustration—60 years of it, give or take—came the start of unification.

The path to merger

The key to merger was getting enough voters, specifically those in Rio Linda, to support a single unified district. Of the five elementary districts in North Sacramento County—Elverta Joint and Robla did not participate in the merger and remain separate today—Rio Linda was by far the largest. And, by all accounts, Rio Linda’s teachers, board, and community would not support a unified district that put Grant’s administrative leadership in charge.

Another unification attempt, which would have created two K-12 districts using Interstate 80 as the dividing line, failed when a judge ruled that it would not be racially neutral. But by the middle of this decade, voters in North Sacramento and Rio Linda agreed that something needed to be done, saying in a nonbinding referendum that they would support unification.

All four boards signed on to the new plan, which would create a district with a new name and a new governance structure, in May 2006. The plan was approved by the state in March 2007 and the Measure B election, as it was known, was set for November.

“The one thing you have to have in any unification is people who are willing to stay in it for the long haul,” Fowler says. “You have to have someone who is obstinate, someone who is

pig-headed, and someone like me who says we're in it for the long haul."

Patrick Kemp, who served on the Grant board from 2001 until the district folded, says unification makes sense.

"I've supported that for 10 years," Kemp says. "I always felt that one large district would be a major advantage over four districts, and it would end the pointing of fingers at each other."

The buildup to the election, true to the area's history, was bitter. Voters had to say yes or no on the unification issue and, at the same time, select the seven-member school board. Twenty-four people—most serving on one of the previous four boards—ran for election on informal slates.

"There were two issues, and they were very different issues," says John Ennis, a special education teacher at Foothill High School and president of the Grant teachers union. "There was voting yes for Measure B and unification, and everyone supported that. That was the easy part. When people realized they were consolidating the board into one, then it became very cutthroat and political."

Anti-Grant feelings were evident at the polls, as six of the seven board members selected were from the elementary districts. Ennis' union, which had a long-running feud with the Grant board, supported the elementary slate. Rio Linda parents and community members, as expected, were the most active in getting out the vote.

"I would say, from about June to November, I worked around the clock," Young says. "It was confusing because we had a lot of educating to do with people on the ballot measure and electing the candidates. . . . There was a real fear of it being a takeover or absorbed into the Grant district, so we had to explain that it wasn't a takeover. We were hoping to reorganize and start fresh and really bring the best of the best to the new district."

Moving forward

Starting Nov. 7, the day after the election, the clock was ticking. The new board moved quickly to hire Frank Porter, who had served as Rio Linda's superintendent for seven years, as interim superintendent. As he worked to hire central office administrators, Porter held one-on-one meetings with staff and visited schools.

"For a while, I was the district's only employee," says Porter, who was hired full-time in June. "It gave new meaning to the expression, 'It's lonely at the top.'"

Working with consultants, Porter developed a detailed implementation plan that included a public workshop focused on Twin Rivers' mission and vision. More than 1,000 people attended four community and employee summits. A student roundtable discussion also was held, and summer school teachers received advance training on ways to better serve students.

In the days leading to July 1, two roadblocks hampered

the unification process. First, the Grant board approved buyout packages for 11 administrators at a cost of about \$2.5 million. Dave Gordon, superintendent of Sacramento County schools, tried to block the

buyout, saying it was illegal, but a judge ruled in late June that the board was within its authority.

The larger obstacle, and one with potential long-term effects, surrounds the construction of the East Natomas Education Complex. Voters approved funding for the complex, along with a host of other high school renovations, in 2002. Earlier this year, the Grant board broke ground on the \$159 million school despite Twin Rivers' protests that the project is a financial albatross.

"We need a school there," says Kemp, the former Grant board member. "We have the money in place and the land in place. Even if it's a year or two early, you can build it now for \$150 million or wait two or three years and built it for \$180 million."

Porter and Rob Ball, Twin Rivers' associate superintendent of business services, worry that the new school, scheduled to open in 2010, will siphon money from other necessary renovation projects and place a huge debt load on the district.

"We asked them not to start it and to let the new board start it, but they decided to fast-track it instead," Ball says. "There are holes in the funding model, massive debt, and not enough students to put in that school."

For Twin Rivers, concerns like these and others, big and small, will continue throughout the early years of unification. Perhaps true unity will take longer, although everyone is eager to leave the past behind.

Porter calls the unification the district's "reinvention moment."

"This is where we get an opportunity to put in place new practices, and we get one shot at it," he says. "It is our time to reinvent and establish a new culture that will lead to higher results for students."

Board member Fowler agrees. "The board has worked hard together as a team to make certain that people in our communities know this district belongs to them," she says. "It doesn't belong to the school board members or the administration. . . . Given time, we'll make certain this is a great district." ■

Glenn Cook (gcook@nsba.org) is editor-in-chief of *American School Board Journal*.