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No big bucks to be saved by merging schools divisions: expert

Education finance expert John Weins says cons of fewer school boards outweigh the pros

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The possibility of merging Saskatchewan school divisions has been in the news recently. A Manitoba education finance expert says such amalgamations do not save the taxpayer much money. (Shutterstock/Syda Productions)

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Saskatchewan might be tempted to merge school divisions, but it will not save the government a tonne of money, an educational expert says.

John Weins, the retired dean of education and professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba, has spent decades studying education finance, governance and politics.

In an interview with the Morning Edition's Sheila Coles, he was asked about Saskatchewan Education Minister Don Morgan's plan to review Kindergarten-to-Grade-12 school governance.

Does Sask. need 28 school divisions?

The Opposition NDP has suggested the Sask. Party government wants to merge the 28 districts and have appointed school board trustees instead of elected ones.

The government is dealing with a big budget deficit and is looking to save money, but insists no decisions have been made yet.

"If it's about money, I think there is actually no evidence to show at all that anybody has saved money by doing this," Weins said.

Expect salaries of administrators to rise: Weins

Although with fewer boards there would be fewer trustee salaries to pay, experience in Manitoba has shown that larger school districts tend to spend more on senior administrators.

"The salaries have gone up exponentially as a result of that," he said.

Bigger school districts means in some cases there are more course

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options available for senior students, but there are drawbacks to that as well, including a requirement for more bus trips.

Schools should help people 'live a good life'

On the downside, parents and other members of the public may find they have reduced access to their boards in an amalgamated district.

"They're further and further removed from the people they are serving," he said.

"What keeps education alive and vibrant is this discussion that goes on about what we think it means to live a good life, and to live a good life among other people, and to help other people live a good life."

At one point in his career, Weins thought amalgamating school boards would have more pros than cons, but over the years, he's come to believe otherwise.

"I suspect it's a trend that's not necessarily a good trend for education," he said.


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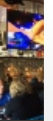
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