

Free New York!

1535 Hertel Ave.
Buffalo, New York 14216
(716) 566-7720
President
James Ostrowski

FreeBuffalo.org
FreeBuffalo@adelphia.net
cell (716) 435-8918
Executive Director
Paulette Peterson

Free New York News Alert No. 14

Special Districts Favor Special Interests

A Proposal to Eliminate School Districts

By James Ostrowski

November 12, 2006

New York State has too many government agencies employing too many workers making too much money.

Some have proposed centralizing government functions into county, regional or state agencies as the best means to reduce bureaucracy. However, historically and in theory, centralization does not make government smaller, just more distant and unresponsive. You end up being ruled by highly-paid strangers in distant capitals.

The challenge is reduce the number of government agencies without centralizing power or removing local control. For the fourth time,¹ Free New York has found a way.

In New York State, there are 705 school districts. In Erie County, there are 29 separate school districts, each a government unto itself with elected officials and in most cases with budgets approved at special elections. In large cities such as Buffalo, voters choose board members but do not approve budgets. With exception of New York City, these districts are, in effect, separate governments run by elected schools boards.

The school boards are chosen in special elections with very low turnouts. Most of the voters have a special interest in the outcome, for example, school district employees and the parents of students. The general interests of average citizens are not a significant factor in these elections.

The results are predictable: bloated payrolls and some of the highest property taxes in the country. The Tax Foundation recently concluded that Niagara County, for example, is the highest taxed county in the nation, relative to assessed valuation.² Schools districts account for fifty-five percent of that tax burden.³

Giving voters the right to approve budgets has utterly failed to restrain spending. Again, such elections are dominated by special interests which favor higher spending. On occasions when budgets are defeated, similar budgets are often re-submitted until the opposition is worn down.

Another deterrent to competitive elections is the artificial nature of the school districts. In 2005, we saw almost every incumbent Erie County Legislator re-elected whereas several incumbent town board members were defeated. It is easier for challengers to defeat incumbents when they are running in their own communities as opposed to special districts which cobble together different communities or neighborhoods.

The electoral history of Erie County shows a clear pattern: incumbents are most vulnerable in small districts that correspond to organic

¹ [Public Authorities Have Failed the Public; Should We Revive the Old Board of Supervisors?; Comptroller's Audit Proves IDAs Must be Abolished.](#)

² http://www.niagara-gazette.com/weekendcatchup/local_story_293233337.html

³ http://www.niagara-gazette.com/local/local_story_313205202.html

communities, for example, Buffalo council districts, rather than larger districts which combine different neighborhoods, for example, the Erie County Legislature.

The present regime allows special interests to use special districts and special elections to control the schools for their own purposes at the expense of the general public which is largely irrelevant to the process.

We propose to eliminate all these school districts insofar as they constitute separate governments. We propose to eliminate all the elected school boards and special budget elections.

Under our plan, each city or town will have its own school district. Why elect a board to run the schools when there is already a municipal legislature in each municipality? Responsibility for the schools would shift to the existing town boards, mayors and city councils. Each town board would appoint a superintendent to run the schools on a daily basis. In cities, the mayor would nominate a candidate for superintendent subject to the consent of the council.

In sparsely populated rural areas, perhaps five or so towns could cluster together to form a district with each town's supervisor serving on the school board.⁴

This alternative system has many advantages. First and foremost, *the voters in general elections will elect the policymakers who run the schools.* Special interests will be less likely to dominate elections when the turnout goes from 10 percent to 60 percent. All of the costs associated with special elections and with maintaining separate school boards are eliminated.

Finally, when the schools become a department of the existing municipal government, consolidation of non-educational functions can occur. The existing parks department can replace the groundskeepers who maintain school sports fields. The public works departments can replace the

⁴ One critic of a draft of this paper posted online for comment, pointed out that some rural districts are already consolidated. First, that means that this proposal will cause them minimal disruption or cause for complaint. However, the comment overlooks the essence of this proposal, which is to put control of government schools in the hands of municipal officials chosen at general elections.

school building engineers and so on with each and every expensively duplicated function.

All in all, this proposal would eliminate 203 elected officials in Erie County alone and thousands statewide.

In sum, costs will be reduced and the grip of special interests will be loosened, which can only lead to a greater focus on *educating students* which is after all supposed to be the point of it all.

Appendix

School Districts in Erie County

<i>District</i>	<i>Board members</i>
1. Akron Central School District	7
2. Alden Central School District	7
3. Amherst Central School District	7
4. Buffalo City School District	9
5. Cheektowaga Central School District	7
6. Cheektowaga-Maryvale Union Free School District	5
7. Cheektowaga-Sloan Union Free School District	7
8. Clarence Central School District	7
9. Cleveland Hill Union Free School District	5
10. Depew Union Free School District	7
11. East Aurora Union Free School District	7
12. Eden Central School District	7
13. Evans-Brant Central School District (Lake Shore)	7
14. Frontier Central School District	9
15. Grand Island Central School District	7
16. Hamburg Central School District	7
17. Holland Central School District	7
18. Hopevale Union Free School District At Hamburg	5
19. Iroquois Central School District	7
20. Kenmore-Tonawanda Union Free School District	5
21. Lackawanna City School District	7
22. Lancaster Central School District	7
23. North Collins Central School District	7
24. Orchard Park Central School District	7
25. Springville-Griffith Institute Central School District	7
26. Sweet Home Central School District	7
27. Tonawanda City School District	8
28. West Seneca Central School District	7
29. Williamsville Central School District	10