

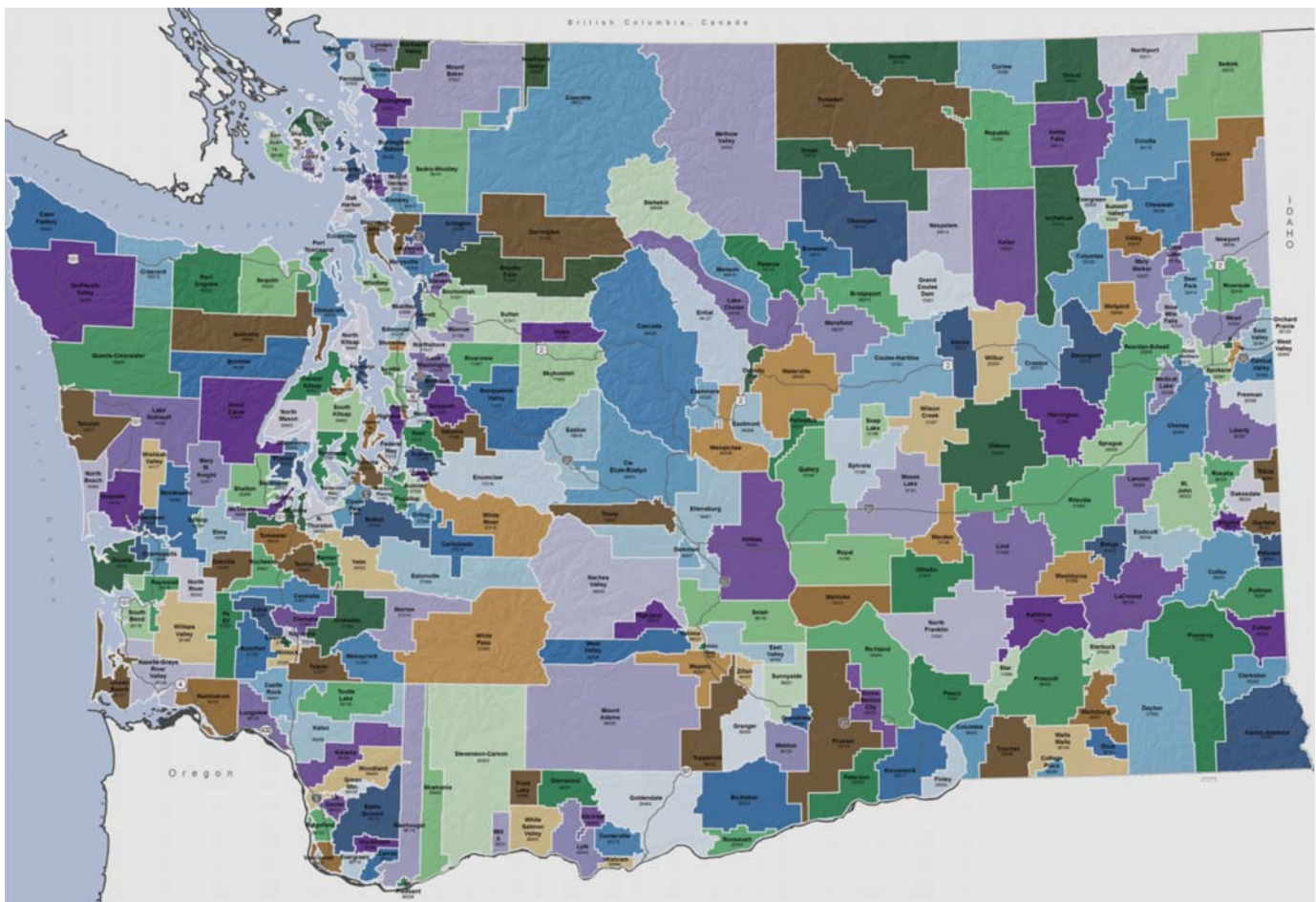


APRIL 5, 2019

Washington has a lot of school districts with just one high school - is that a bad thing? (Part I)

TL;DR ("too long, didn't read", aka SparkNotes for those non-Millennial readers)

- Washington has approximately 300 school districts
- 79% of all Washington school districts have just one high school; of urban districts 38% have only one high school
- Significant trade-offs exist between small and large districts
- District boundaries driven more by history than by county/city borders



Examining single-high school districts

During a recent project looking at [Washington school district data](#), we noticed many school districts with only one high school. We were specifically interested in the urban, single high school districts – places where the distance between rival high schools in neighboring districts is only a few miles.

And now that we have a blog, and a devoted readership base (tell your friends, [sign up for our newsletter!](#)) we decided it was time to dig into the data and answer a few nagging questions. The first two we'll answer today, the remaining in a follow-up, Part II post.

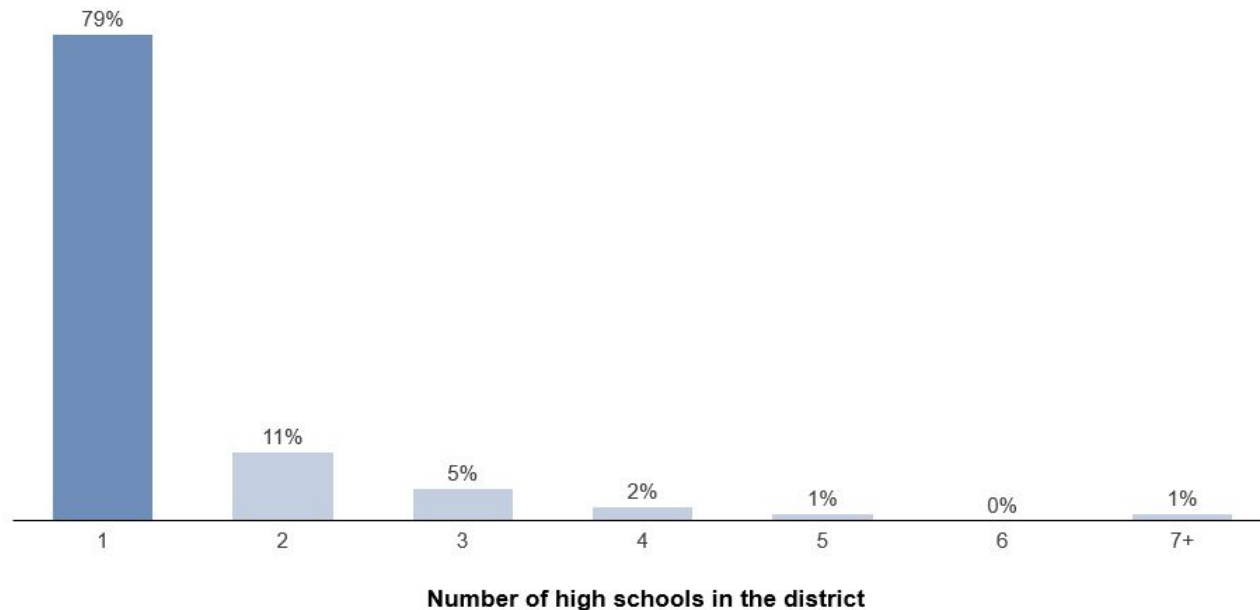
- How common are urban, single-high school districts in Washington?
- Are small districts bad?

- How does Washington compare to other states?
- What are the options for increasing school district scale efficiencies?

Setting the stage

First, let's ground ourselves with the basic stats: Washington has ~300 school districts, with an average enrollment of 3,500 students. Across the state, 79% have just one high school.

Distribution of Washington districts by number of high schools

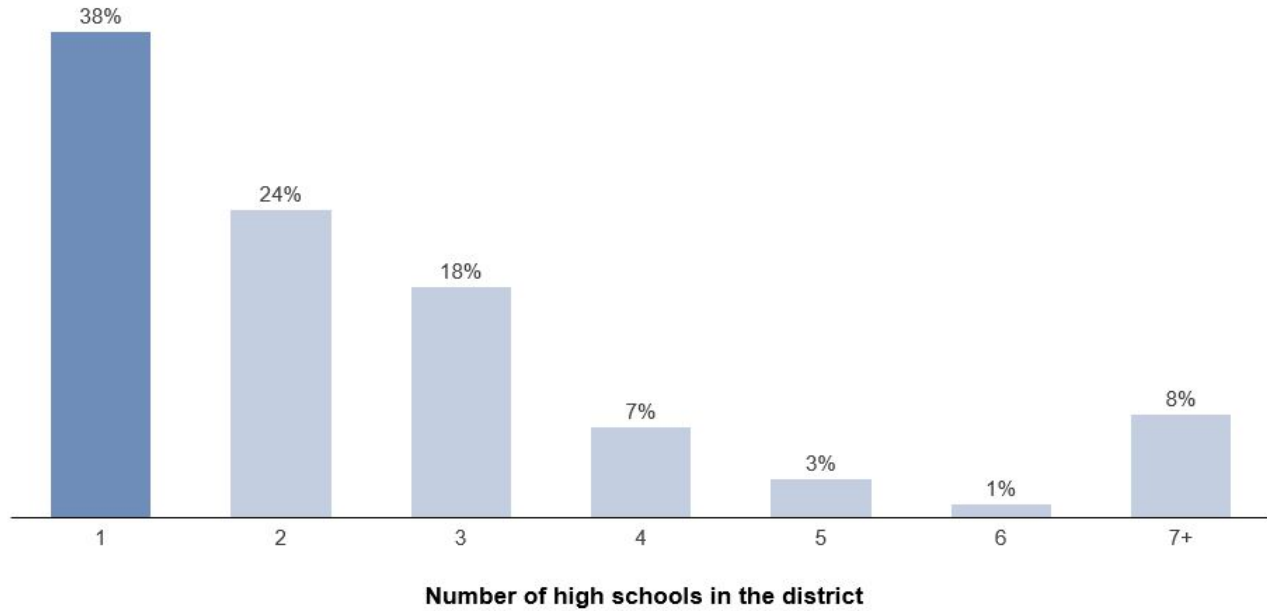


These results aren't terribly surprising since more than 75% of Washington districts are rural. These are districts where we'd expect only one high school across a large land area.

What we're really interested however, are the *urban* districts with one high school. For the purposes of our analysis, we categorized urban districts as those within or adjacent to major cities and suburbs with more than 100,000 people. All other districts we classified as rural.

Using this methodology, we found 38% of urban districts have just one high school. Examples include University Place (near Tacoma), Tukwila (near Seattle), and East Valley (near Spokane).

Urban districts in Washington by number of high schools



Is this a bad thing?

Obligatory consultant answer: it depends. The research is quite mixed on optimal school district size. What is clear are the trade-offs between small and large districts:

Small school districts

- Lower transportation costs
- More responsive to local community
- Greater flexibility in programs, policies

Large school districts

- More specialized course offerings
- Lower administrative costs per student
- Potential for greater equity with larger districts

Aren't district borders limited by county and city boundaries?

In Washington, as in many states, district borders are not beholden to municipal boundaries. There are multiple examples of districts spanning county and city lines (e.g. Northshore and Nine Mile Falls) Boundaries are often a product of past rural consolidation efforts and previous political battles – essentially, there aren't specific methods or rules that have resulted in the current patchwork we have today.

Check out Part II TWITTER LINKEDIN REDDIT TUMBLR PINTEREST 1 LIKE

In our follow-up post, we'll look at how Washington's school district map compares nationally, and discuss recent efforts to consolidate districts.

PREVIOUS

Washington Isn't The Only State With Many Single-high School Districts...maybe That's Because Mergers Are Super Hard (Part II)

Data sources: ERDC; 2015, NCES ELSI Database; 2016-2017.

NEXT

Oh No! Another CSR Article: The Über Framework (Part II)

Methods: To determine the number of high schools in each district, we applied the following criteria: We then excluded alternative, charter, and virtual schools as defined by the Department of Education NCES database. We also excluded juvenile detention centers, community colleges, educational services districts, and schools with fewer than 10 high school students enrolled. To define "urban" districts, we used the NCES classification and

included (all cities, and large and midsize suburbs).

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