



# KINETIC WEST

## 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.

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).

### **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:

#### **Large school districts**

- More specialized course offerings
- Lower administrative costs per student
- Potential for greater equity with [larger districts](#)

#### **Small school districts**

- [Lower transportation costs](#)
- More responsive to local community
- Greater flexibility in programs, policies

### **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.

*Data sources: [ERDC; 2015](#), [NCES ELSI Database; 2016-2017](#).*

*Methods: To determine the number of high schools in a district we looked at all schools with students enrolled in 12th grade in the state of Washington. 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).

## Washington isn't the only state with many single-high school districts...maybe that's because mergers are super hard (Part II)

- [79% of all Washington school districts](#) have just one high school
- 38% of urban school districts in Washington have only one high school
- Washington is not alone in having many urban, single high school districts
- District mergers are tough, but there are other options to increase scale

### Recap from Part I

[In our last episode](#), we dug into some of the stats on Washington school districts. We found that 79% all Washington districts have just one high school. Of districts in urban areas, 38% have only one high school (see “urban” definition at the end of this post). In multiple instances these solo high schools are within a short drive of high schools in neighboring districts.

### How does Washington compare?

When looking at national data, Washington is in the middle-of the pack (#21) for percent of urban schools with one high school. Our takeaway: urban, single high school districts are not a phenomenon isolated to Washington.

A few other items of note:

- Of Western peer states, Washington is still in the middle – between Oregon and California / Colorado
- Maryland and Florida stood out for their low share of single high school districts (7% and 11%, respectively). Our hunch: when district borders align with county borders (as is the case for MD, FL, and other states) districts can achieve greater scale... to be further analyzed another time!
- 5 states (Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming) have no urban districts with only 1 high school – this is driven by a high overall rural population
- A 6th state, Hawaii, also has 0 urban districts with 1 high school – that’s because there is only one school district for the entire state

## **Should there be fewer single-high school districts?**

Both nationally and in Washington, there was a significant wave of school district consolidation during the [middle part of the 1900s](#) as our nation moved away from the “one-room schoolhouse” towards the elementary /middle / high school model that exists today. As recently as 2009, former Washington [Governor Gregoire requested](#) that Washington’s state superintendent (OSPI) should make recommendations for further consolidation. All this to say, consolidations are still an often-discussed topic.

[As mentioned in part I](#), there are can be benefits to larger school districts and consolidation including more specialized course offerings, lower administrative costs, and potential reductions in cross-district inequities.

However, the actual work of consolidation – both political and logistical – can be a big barrier. District consolidation involves significant efforts to convince voters, teachers, union members, and students that a merger is the right way to go – just ask [Vermont](#) and [New York](#). There is also a substantial amount of logistical legwork involved to plan and execute a merger (e.g. facilities changes, employee and payroll integration, revised student policies, new transportation routes, etc.), which can stretch over multiple years and cost millions of dollars.

## **Is there another way?**

Just because consolidations are hard and politically-fraught, doesn’t mean districts shouldn’t pursue them. But there are other ways to realize the scale benefits of larger districts without the challenges of consolidation – namely through partnerships with regional networks and intermediaries.

Washington already has a system of 9 regional networks, known as [Educational Service Districts \(ESDs\)](#). These state-funded organizations shoulder some of the back-office, administrative, and professional development burden on behalf of school districts.

Districts can also work with intermediaries to address common challenges. One great example is the [Community Center for Education Results](#) (CCER), which works with 7 South King County school districts to provide research and data analysis, as well as programmatic assistance to support [worksite tours](#). (\*\*Disclaimer: we work with CCER to help plan worksite tours – [let us know](#) if your organization wants to get involved!)

## **So what does it all mean?**

We see an opportunity for individual school districts, and states more broadly, to re-evaluate current district boundaries to ensure students and tax payers are well-served by high quality and efficient education systems. In some cases, consolidation may be the best option, in other cases regional networks and intermediaries can help small districts achieve scale and avoid the pain of mergers.

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