

# SCENARIO: SOUTH POTTERVILLE

## THE SITUATION

Greenland, West Fork and Prairie Grove are three small, rural school districts in picturesque country just south of a small city in a Southern state.

That city of 58,000, Potterville, is home to the state university.

For years, the three adjacent school systems have been friendly rivals in athletics, particularly the two sports that most animate the people of this state, football and basketball. Educationally, they've pursued separate destinies, the only shared service being a regional vo-tech school, recently renamed the School of Information Systems and Technology, which is in Greenland.

All that is now about to change, thanks to orders from on high.

State government has ordered all school districts with fewer than 1,000 students to find a partner with which to merge. The consolidation push grew out of the state's defeat in a school equity lawsuit filed by a very small, mostly minority district at the other end of the state. The state's Supreme Court ruled that the state's school finance system, in which the state had contributed 42 percent of the cost of education, with local property taxes providing the rest, created vast inequalities in resources and facilities among districts.

The governor's response was twofold. On the facilities issue, he hired an out-of-state consultant to evaluate all the state's 5,800 schools and recommend priorities and standards for a statewide school capital program. The evaluation found that the state had hundreds of small, old school buildings, often in rural communities, which could not be renovated to 21<sup>st</sup> century standards and ought to be replaced. It estimated the immediate costs of renovating and replacing inadequate schools, and handling deferred maintenance on adequate ones, at \$2.5 billion; it estimated the five-year need, given enrollment trends and building life cycles, at \$4.5 billion.

The governor thus backed a \$3 billion bond to address the facilities problem, saying the state would provide 60 percent funding on all projects done in accord with the state plan.

On the operating funding issue, the governor's stance was that money was being wasted on inefficiencies of scale in the state's 500-plus school systems. Some high school chemistry classes, he famously complained, had more Bunsen burners than they did students.

If the state had to fund a higher percentage of local school costs, he said, it needed to have confidence that local districts were being run efficiently. In his view, that meant large-scale consolidation.

This caused a firestorm. Rural communities rallied to oppose his plan under the banner of a nonprofit called SaveOurSchools (SOS). It cited research data indicating that small schools improve faculty-student interactions and school-community links - and produce better academic outcomes. Rural legislators fiercely opposed the governor's plan, causing stalemate for a year, until the governor compromised.

His goal, he said, was administrative efficiency, not large schools. Consolidated school districts could keep schools as small as they liked, as long as they stayed within the state's 2-percent-a-year operating cap, and upgraded or replaced any schools rated inadequate by the state evaluators. Combined districts would get a more generous allotment for capital projects from the state fund than ones that insisted on going it alone. They were also given a one-time chance to float bonds to augment their state share for capital projects without the debt service counting against their spending cap.

## **THE LOCAL CONTROVERSY**

All three districts south of Potterville have some serious challenges with school buildings. The carrot-and-stick package in the final consolidation law led all three to consider consolidating. Greenland and Prairie Grove fell just shy of the 1,000-student cutoff; West Fork was just above it. The state estimated the combined district would have \$27 million in facilities needs, of which the state would pay 65 percent, or \$17.5 million.

Local opinion ran 3 to 1 against consolidation; driving around the county, it was common to see yard signs proclaiming "Save Our Schools," "Danger: Merge at Your Own Risk" and "Let the Profs Build Their Kids New Schools; We'll Keep Ours."

But the three school boards – under strong lobbying from local chambers of commerce and from the university employees clustered in the Greenland subdivisions nearest Potterville – voted last year to join forces.

Now, the newly consolidated South Potterville School District needs to cope with the challenges of putting together a facilities plan. Those challenges are many.

## **THE THREE SYSTEMS**

The **Greenland** district lies closest to Potterville, and includes the widest range of household incomes. The village of Greenland lies seven miles south of Potterville's southern boundary. It's an old center of farming commerce whose main street is now dotted with empty storefronts thanks to the Wal-Mart out near the interstate to the west.

The rest of Greenland is farming community, except for the tiny village of Winslow far to the south, which has its own ancient, historically designated schoolhouse, attended by 87 students..

Greenland has three other schools in a central campus on the eastern edge of the town. The schools are:

- A 40-year-old, one-story, concrete block construction, K-4 elementary with 370 students, rated adequate by the state, but in need of a new roof.
- A 279-student, 5-8 middle school of the same '60 vintage and design as the elementary. It is connected by a breezeway to the elementary; the schools share a gym-atorium and a small library that are entered from the breezeway. Also rated adequate, but needing a new roof.
- A 294-student, three-story brick high school in the antebellum style that is 85 years old and rated inadequate by the state. It has ancient mechanicals, no Internet access and outmoded science labs.

**Prairie Grove** is to the west of Greenland; close to Potterville, it includes some older residential neighborhoods with working class families. A commercial complex centered around the WalMart sits at the I-540 interchange at the district's western border. The rest of the district is hill country, with a mix of rural enclaves whose residents have lived in the same place for generations and high-end hillside homes of affluent families that moved here to enjoy the gorgeous scenery and fine weather.

Prairie Grove's three schools aren't on the same campus, but are clustered near each other in the village of Prairie Grove, where storefronts have also been emptied by the advent of Wal-Mart:

- The 280-student, brick high school is more than a hundred years old. It is a warren of large, dark corridors and small classrooms that was rated inadequate by the state. It has balky heating, no air conditioning, plus problems with mold and unabated asbestos. It also has a proud athletic tradition. Its Fighting Squirrels have long been a power in Class A (small school) football and basketball in the state; in these parts, loyalty to the Squirrels is fierce.

- Prairie Grove's elementary and junior high schools are newer, '50s vintage buildings done in watered-down International style design. Each one-story school has a flat roof that leaks and, with 330 students each, they are operating at full capacity. New subdivisions going up west of Potterville are pushing them over capacity. The elementary uses modular units in the parking lot for a nurse's office, guidance and special education. Music and art teachers have no rooms, lugging instruments and supplies from room to room on a cart. The state rated each school as acceptable, but needing upgrade to handle increased enrollment.

**West Fork's** three schools all were built in the 1960s. The community is an interesting mix of rural folk with deep roots, and an artistic colony of free spirits from the university who moved to its hill country in the '60s and never left.

- The 411-student, 1960's-era K-4 elementary is well-maintained and rated adequate, but unpopular with teachers because it was built with an open classroom design which now requires partitions between classrooms. Teachers call it noisy and impractical.
- The 366-student, 5-8 middle school was built as a junior high. The two-story building is of steel frame and curtain wall construction. It has hallway lockers that no one uses as the school is now operated. It has a large number of interior classrooms with no windows. The state rated it acceptable, but in need of upgrade.
- The 343-student high school, Prairie Grove's athletic archrival, was rated by the state as adequate. It operates now at about 100 students below capacity and has large athletic fields that give it room to expand.

## **YOUR WORK TODAY**

Imagine you are a citizen committee, chosen for your varied expertise and civic spirit, which has been asked by the school board to come up with a facilities plan for the new combined district. Among your challenges are:

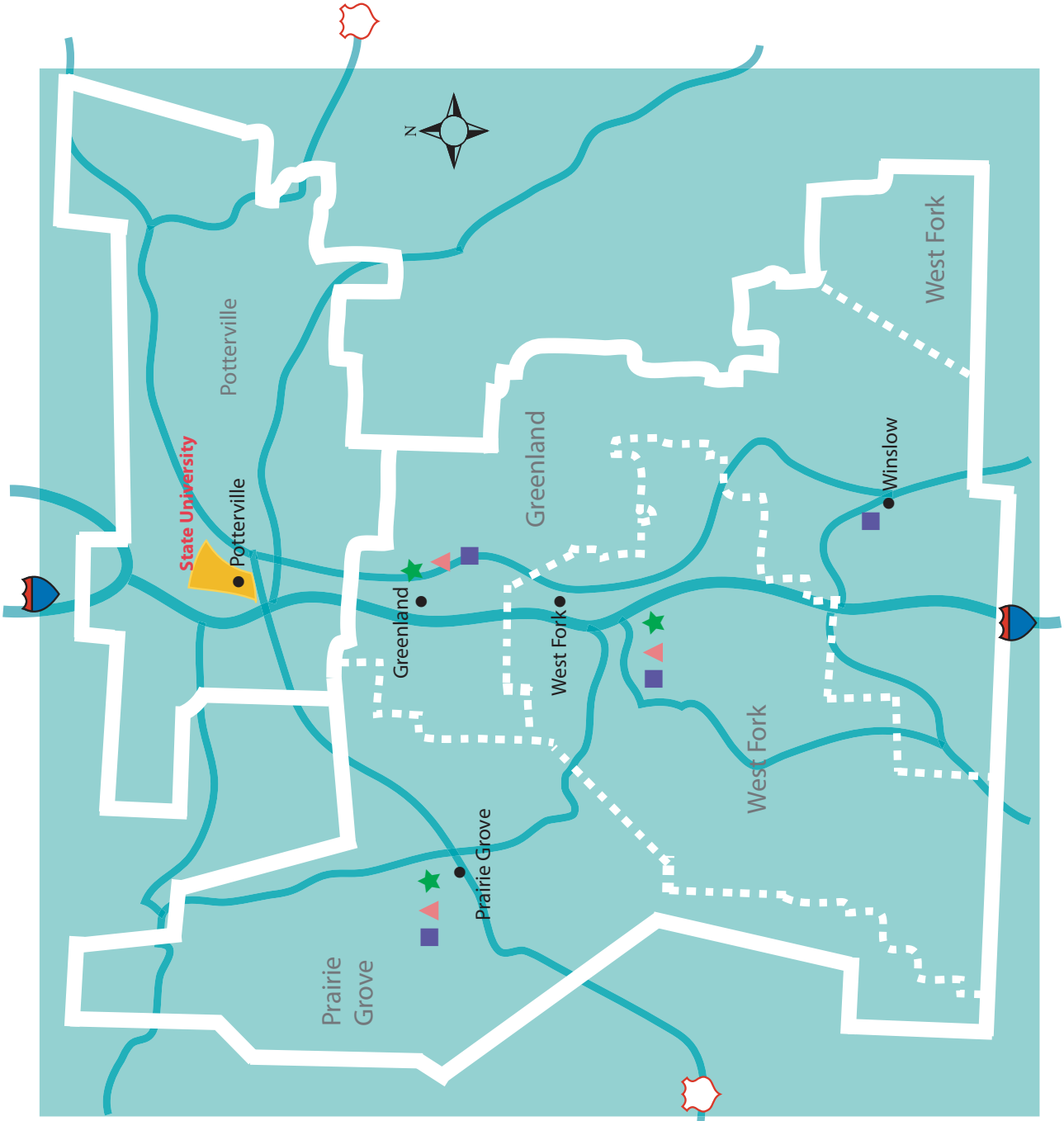
- The school board's wish is to close at least three schools to save money. So you must decide which schools to renovate and which to close, being clear about the standards being used. Also, think about whether any new schools should be opened and where. (Should they be new construction or conversions?)

- Decide, in cases where schools are to be renovated, what kind of steps need to be taken with design and materials turn the schools into quality environments for learning.
- Sketch a fiscal approach that keeps the schools plan affordable and maintains some equity of investment among Prairie Grove, West Fork and Greenland
- Suggest a public process that would keep old rivalries among the original districts, as well as newer tensions over the forced consolidation, from tearing the new South Potterville School District apart. Can school design help bring these three communities together?

You can other challenges to this list as you see fit. For each challenge, you can suggest several possible strategies or solutions. Do not get hung up seeking the one perfect solution. With each suggested solution, be honest and clear about the tradeoffs it entails. And wherever possible, offer examples of real places where your ideas have been tried successfully.

Good luck. Have fun. Be creative. In talking through this scenario, please do not change any of its basic facts, but feel free to go beyond the stated situation to introduce ideas or players who could help bring about a good result – as long as the additions are realistic.

# South Potter County District



-  Old District Lines
-  New District Lines
-  Highways
- Cultural Institutions**
-  City Center
-  Elementary Schools
-  Middle Schools
-  High Schools

## South Potter County School District

	West Fork	Prairie Grove	Greenland
Adult Education Levels	2004	2004	2004
Adults with a High School Diploma (%)	77.6	76.6	78.3
Adults with a Bachelor's Degree (%)	11.1	13.4	15.3
<b>Household Characteristics</b>			
Number of Households	2,090	2,793	1,778
Single-Parent Households with Children (%)	8.4	7.8	8.9
<b>Income and Wealth (\$)</b>			
Median Household Income	37,533	37,624	39,100
Income Per Person	16,116	15,538	16,837
Median Home Value	74,072	82,858	77,862
<b>Household Income Distribution (%)</b>			
Less than \$15,000	17.9	19.2	16.6
\$15,000-\$29,999	20.5	21.5	20.1
\$30,000-\$49,999	27.6	25.7	27.5
\$50,000-\$74,999	22.0	20.4	22.0
\$75,000-\$99,999	7.2	7.5	8.3
\$100,000-\$149,999	3.7	4.5	4.3
\$150,000 or More	1.2	1.2	1.2
<b>Population</b>			
Population	5,603	7,394	4,665
Population Density	43	70	63
Median Age	37	37	36
<b>Population Distribution by Age (%)</b>			
4 Years or Younger	6.4	6.9	6.7
5-19 Years	22.7	22.5	22.2
20-44 Years	33.6	33.8	35.4
45-64 Years	27.5	24.5	25.8
65 Years or Older	9.9	12.5	9.9
<b>Ethnicity Facts</b>			
White persons, %	94.60%	95.00%	95.50%
Black or African American persons, %	0.40%	0.50%	1.10%
American Indian and Alaska Native persons, %	0.90%	1.50%	1.20%
Asian persons, %	0.50%	0.50%	0.40%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, %	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Persons reporting some other race, %	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Persons reporting two or more races, %	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin, %	3.10%	2.00%	2.20%
<b>Education Facts</b>			
High school graduates, percent of persons age 2	41.50%	35.50%	37.20%
Bachelor's degree or higher, pct of persons age :	6.70%	13.10%	11.70%

Source: [www.schoolmatters.com](http://www.schoolmatters.com)

## South Potter County School District

	West Fork	Prairie Grove	Greenland
<b>Enrollment of Racial/Ethnic Groups</b>	2004	2004	2004
White (%)	97.1	97.1	94.8
Black (%)	0.6	0.2	0.6
Hispanic (%)	1.4	1.2	3.4
Asian/Pacific Islander (%)	0.6	0.7	0.6
American Indian/Alaska Native (%)	0.3	0.9	0.7
<b>Enrollment of Students with Special Needs</b>			
Economically Disadvantaged (% receiving free lunch )	39.2	32.3	38.5
English Language Learners (%)	0.0	0.1	0.3
Students with Disabilities (%)	13.1	9.6	11.3
<b>Enrollment of Other Student Characteristics</b>			
Migrant (%)	0.0	1.2	0.2
<b>Enrollment Distribution by Gender</b>			
Female (%)	46.6	48.3	47.6
Male (%)	53.4	51.7	52.4

	West Fork	Prairie Grove	Greenland
<b>How Students Performed on State Reading Tests</b>	2004	2004	2004
Grade 4 Reading Proficiency (%)	68.4	63.6	67.1
Grade 6 Reading Proficiency (%)	33.3	59.0	57.9
Grade 8 Reading Proficiency (%)	63.0	75.0	46.9
Grade 10 Reading Proficiency (%)	54.9	62.2	25.8
<b>How Students Performed on State Math Tests</b>			
Grade 4 Math Proficiency (%)	78.5	63.6	64.5
Grade 6 Math Proficiency (%)	42.7	61.9	40.4
Grade 8 Math Proficiency (%)	31.5	55.0	39.1
High School Math Proficiency (%)	33.1	68.1	56.1
<b>School Statistics</b>			
Number of Schools	3	4	3
Number of Students	1120	1379	893