



September 20, 2023

Vanessa Green Sindere
President & CEO, Indiana Chamber of Commerce
115 W. Washington Street, Suite 850S
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Dear Vanessa,

Congratulations on your appointment as incoming President and Chief Executive Officer of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce. The Indiana Chamber has a proud history and has been an integral part of Indiana's growth and success throughout the last century.

As you begin your work leading the Indiana Chamber, I write to you today to encourage you to take this opportunity to rethink the Chamber's position on school district consolidation.

The Chamber's Indiana Prosperity 2035 plan calls for a reduction "by half the number of very small school districts with enrollments below 2,000 students."

While the stated aims of this position are laudable, the message sent to our small towns and rural communities is damaging. Proposing to do away with small public school districts through consolidation will be seen as a death knell for the millions of Hoosiers who live in small towns and rural communities.

State government spends half its budget on public education. Places to save money are plentiful, but I disagree with singling out our small towns and rural communities.

We need a vision for Indiana that reverses the population decline and makes our small cities and towns a destination to live, work and raise a family as opposed to plans that are perceived to give up on them entirely. For far too long, our state has ignored our small and rural communities and had no plan for them, only giveaways to corporations.

Nearly one-third of Indiana's population – about two million Hoosiers – live in rural Indiana. It is projected that two-thirds of our counties will lose population over the next 35 years. Throughout Indiana the historic downtowns of our rural hometowns are in decline and decay.

It is time for a new, comprehensive economic development playbook. For Indiana to reach its potential, we need a bold approach to economic development that treats all 92 counties as communities of opportunity.

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That's why I've proposed an Indiana Main Street Initiative to take just ten percent of what Indiana spends on economic development.

By redirecting \$100 million dollars the state is already spending to our small towns, we can create an additional \$16 billion dollars in economic growth while restoring balance and fairness to our economic development policies.

With local leadership and local control, we can revitalize our small towns and hometowns with a fraction of the investment we give away in the form of incentives.

I want to make clear that I understand the difference between school district consolidation and school consolidation. I realize that, in concept, consolidating district operations and administration doesn't guarantee schools will be consolidated. Two districts could conceivably consolidate while leaving "small" high schools in place. But I also know, as critics of consolidation point out, that isn't likely. Across our state it's easy to see the remnants of a school consolidation push that began in the 1950s.

Too many towns that lost their local school to consolidation dried up and were virtually swept from the maps while other towns kept their schools and their identities. These communities had a better opportunity to survive.

But this debate misses the point. The Indiana Chamber of Commerce should not put its considerable influence behind an effort that is so contrary to the beliefs and ideals of rural Indiana. Lobbying for consolidation, no matter how noble the aim, sends the wrong message to the two million Hoosiers who choose to live, work and raise their families in small communities and is ideologically inconsistent with our shared principles of school choice and local control.

I respectfully encourage you to reexamine the Chamber's position on school consolidation and the message it sends to our small towns and rural communities. If you have any additional information or insight that we should be made aware of, please let us know.

I want to again congratulate you on your appointment as President and CEO of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce and I look forward to meeting and working with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Eric R. Doden". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Eric Doden