

# All layered up

Editorial Published: June 18, 2012 - 06:54 PM

The hope of the Kasich administration, which last week released a report on local governments sharing services, is to encourage greater collaboration at the grass roots. To do so holds much potential for reducing expenses and improving services, quite a feat at a time of sharply curtailed state support for cities, counties and schools.

“Beyond Boundaries: A Shared Services Action Plan for Ohio Schools and Governments” plows some familiar ground, previous reports establishing the burden created by the state’s overlapping units of government. The report argues that local governments and schools must think more creatively because the state’s tax burden is too high.

In reality, Ohio’s overall tax burden falls in the middle of state rankings. Still, there are plenty of reasons to move forward. Rather than being a question of taxes, stimulating greater cooperation among local governments means more effectively targeting resources to services instead of administration. More effective coordination of back-office functions among school districts, for example, means more money for classrooms.

Another worthy goal is better planning. With so many layers of government (the report found almost 4,000 units of local government and school systems), decision-making in Ohio is frustratingly slow. Even when consensus is reached, implementation can be delayed and goals modified as solutions work their way through many levels.

The plan released last week correctly urges smoothing the way for shared services, the state removing barriers so simple contracts can be negotiated. Among its recommendations, the report, based on a survey of 1,789 local governments, urges an expanded use of the state’s existing educational service, information technology and educational technology centers to provide services to local governments. The report also urges the state to continue making information available to local governments on how to implement shared services. That wisely recognizes that local governments often lack the tools to move ahead on their own.

Although the report correctly grasps that Ohio has just started on the path to collaboration, it barely touches on the challenges that lie ahead. Few resources are available to locals for planning and for purchasing equipment. The report also concludes that “people and their way of thinking have to change,” yet fails to confront the political obstacles created by local governments determined to cling to their identities at all costs.