

10/23/2007 School Consolidation Forum, Shapleigh Middle School, Kittery, Maine

(26 people were present, including the facilitator and two reporters)

REPORT

Below you will find what the participants wrote down. The process was small group conversations, with a closing full-group discussion. Superintendent Larry Littlefield gave a short informational talk early in the meeting.

CONTENTS:

1. Introductions and Warm up question
2. Three rounds of questions about the mergers
3. Themes identified
4. Forum evaluation (what was good, how can we make the next one better?)

1. WARM UP QUESTION: THINKING BACK ON YOUR SCHOOL EXPERIENCE, WHAT MAKES A GREAT SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?

- great teachers, state standards; sharing among schools
- great teachers make great schools: passionate, engaging, interesting, forward thinking, caring
- my high school provided a very strong arts and music program
- excellent teachers: caring, knowledgeable, dedicated
- late 50's, NJ – school spirit, great teachers who made learning come alive, minimal discipline problems
- teachers who were available
- great teachers, ones that respect the students
- community involvement and support of children; sports; scouting; art, music, theater
- walking to school, neighborhood feel, good teachers

2. THREE ROUNDS OF QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MERGERS

Round One: What aspects of the school mergers might be appealing?

Start by writing down a few thoughts on this yellow sheet, then share them in a go-round at your table.

- Cost savings: consultation services – ordering
- Change is opportunity – Larger community base
- Change is energy – more opportunities – more equitable teacher salaries – facilities upgrade
- Expand opportunities: cultural diversity, better pay for teachers, curriculum diversity
- Change = energy: Reduce complacency and outside the box
- Cost savings (perhaps) – Special needs issues could be better addressed
- Possible magnet schools that specialize – KEYS Region School Dist.
- Increase of mentoring volunteer (and others) efforts
- Reduce teacher turnover because of better pay
- More opportunities

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- Economies of scale – bigger buying co-op – bigger the savings
- Equitable educational opportunities – magnet schools
- Presumed savings & tax reductions – economy of scale
- Improved educational opportunities – re-organization – magnet schools
- Save money – smaller admin costs; develop magnet schools; shared competencies; areas get to know each other, maintenance, special ed, transportation, administration; more educational/extra curricular opportunities – why students in Kittery cost more – economies of scale – Kittery is small 4 bldgs.
- Cost savings in many areas in addition to administration, special ed, and maintenance, transportation, all purchasing (areas get to know each other)
- Magnet schools, taxes, economies of scale
- Possible lower costs of public schools, great efficiency, possible development of more educational opportunities, magnet schools
- Save money, gain efficiencies, bring ME more in line with national averages, merge with school (ex. York/Wells) where education seems to be a higher citizen priority, more courses, teams...collaboration (sharing courses, magnet schools, ext. Marshwood-arts, York-math
- See it as an opportunity for parents to speak up about curriculum (whether dist. Merge or not)
- More availability to more programs and class opportunities – who has the most appealing curriculum
- Economies of scale – shared purchasing, administration; curriculum cross over and magnet like potential, more focus on cooperative aspects of education, joint development of curriculum and diversity
- More options for courses, magnet schools, diversity, financial, purchasing, cooperative aspects instead of conflict, purchase sharing, best practices & comparisons, Rec Adult Ed
- Saving \$ - having best practices shared – bulk savings on purchases – administration reductions potential – increase funding promised by state for minimum receivers – best curriculum – magnet schools potential
- Ability to meet the needs of the advanced students – schools will be able to offer more classes with more students (Calculus II) – possible tax savings/cost savings
- Ability to have schools focus on areas – perhaps could have different schools offer specialized classes – arts/math/science/etc.
- Larger districts – more choices for students, more diverse population
- Sharing the educational resources of the entire region among schools in different towns – a creative approach; the possibility of developing magnet schools – performing arts school, vocational school, college prep

Round Two: What aspects of the school merger might be worrisome?

Start by writing down a few thoughts here, then share them in a go-round at your table.

- Bother of student body to new district?
- Mandating larger class size; travel and transportation issues
- The transition would be rough for a few years – too large class sizes

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- “Forcing” Kittery into another district could have impact on students; lack of constructive leadership from state; could reduce “creative” curriculums because too large
- Long bus rides
- Budget validation process, local control, local debt “may”, savings?
- New budget process – voters – not council vote
- Eliminate local control – bigger town government; valuation system is not fair; no partner for Kittery
- Need potential finances from Department of Education/State to give to voters – longer time to implement, not fair, local debt
- Too much too soon – local control
- Lack of savings, elimination of local control, budget process
- The “fear factor” – principals/superintendents distracted; barriers to consolidation – too quick-mistakes-unintended consequences
- Will it save money?, uncertainty for students, if some staff people let go, lose their ideas, Augusta will listen to parents ideas
- Longer drives – children getting home later – more clubs don’t necessarily mean more involvement from students
- Loss of community of scale (neighborhood vs. towns); loss of program opportunities, transportation
- Numbers-scale, increase taxes, computer systems, divisive, impression we wasted money
- Damage – perception that we’ve been wasting \$ to pass budgets; the numbers (savings) don’t match the headlines; salaries will increase in one district; teacher/student ratios in Kittery may rise; It costs money to consolidate; focus will be on finances and not on student achievement; incompatible computer systems; job insecurity for great positions; Maryland reviewing line item budgets
- The quick process could result in errors/problems; no time to consider all options
- How do we manage the transition – uncertainty of future for current students
- Too quick – financially driven; loss of community, identity/common interest
- Transportation, phantom savings?, technology impact-individualized; merging pay/benefits
- The quality of a school’s educational program often hinges upon the leadership skills and philosophy of school administrators, I am concerned about the possible loss of these resources

Round Three: What other comments, opinions, or questions would you like to share? Do you have suggestions for the next forum, which will include presentations by leaders?

- More creativity into the process
- Promote awareness of the community value of professional educators in public education
- More question & answer sessions with the people from the State who are mandating this consolidation
- KEYS Region Administrative District – Magnate schools – share summer school, shared alternative ed
- Don’t force Kittery on someone; work with it to improve locally
- Need more parent/student involvement
- Talk creatively about education – not just \$

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- One size does not fit all; no local buy in; consolidation is ok-requires good leadership; consolidation of purchasing statewide would be better
- Whole State of Hawaii has one school district – some like, some don't
- Slow it down! Don't forget education of kids – financially driven, not quality driven
- Inflexible consolidation – no other options (ex. \$ follow students)
- Cap on Kittery's funding (750K penalty) – Emphasis on property values for funding
- Is there a way to balance the cost differences between municipalities with different taxable values so that residents feel equal – expand options for public input
- How to get citizen involvement
- Repeal the “marriage tax” for districts
- Slow down the process
- Slow down the process – look at other options

3. THEMES IDENTIFIED

- Concept of magnet schools intriguing
- Concern over financial issues not being equal amongst communities
- Sharing of educational resources among schools in neighboring towns
- We need to pool our knowledge and problem solve together
- Teachers rule!
- How do we really make the money work fairly and effectively
- Where are the cost savings (ie tax reduction)?
- Too top down
- Too much too soon
- Slow the process
- Cost savings – are there any? And will the quality of education improve?
- The consolidation law is too much too quickly – needed, but very ill-conceived
- Where are the cost savings?
- Too rushed to get citizen buy-in
- More questions and concerns than answers
- Districts should share best practices, but state should provide “carrots” not “criticism” (or deny funding for students)
- Slow the process down and use this as an opportunity to improve the quality of education by sharing resources and offering more choices
- Slow down the pace
- Slow down the process!
- Why doesn't the state provide more guidance?

4. FORUM EVALUATION (WHAT WAS GOOD, HOW CAN WE MAKE THE NEXT ONE BETTER?)

- Very informative.
- 1) People need information first – Presentations on: Consolidation details, Budget validation process, Current status of district partnerships. 2) Chance to process information. 3) How to influence legislators.
- Good to hear so many different views yet there could be more folks involved.

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- Where are the parents of the students, Why so many old people, Why so many politicians? Where was the publicity?
- As a new comer to Kittery, I take a great deal of pride in being able to participate in the merger discussions.
- Thank You! It was a start. [we need] more information from state/local officials.
- It felt good to have a forum to express concerns and to listen to what others were thinking.
- Good to get discussions going about education in Kittery.
- Avoid presentations by school officials that tend to divert citizen input.
- Benefit to hear many of us (bi-partisan) have same concerns and hope for same benefits.
- Community workshop co-sponsored by Teachers Bargaining Unit, Parent Organizations and school board. Need to have real in depth conversation about Kittery.
- Good dialogue among those that showed.
- Extremely important and informative.
- No real sense of where this is going. Many ideas – who is driving this? What kind of constructive help are we getting from DOE other than financials! What about the children? I did not hear about the children? Hugely disappointed at turnout – how do we get more people here?
- This meeting was helpful. You will probably get better attendance when this are [sic] more firm.
- Get more information out in the paper about what this means to the community and that community involvement is needed. Emphasize that no decisions have been made yet.
- Schedule a forum along with a PTA fundraiser or school event (art show etc.)
- Allow for “blog” dialogue so people with conflicts can virtually attend.
- Invite DOE and local state legislature and publicize – state that refreshments will be served.
- Get more people involved, post flyers at schools and get onto Portsmouth Community Radio.
- Figure out how to get more people to attend. (few showed if you subtract CWC, Legislators, School committee members). Put out to PTAs, stakeholders, etc.