

## YORK COUNTY

# Report to address dropout epidemic

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Civic group Metro-York will propose a short-term strategy to tackle high-school dropout rates that have become an emergency in York, leaders said.

That immediate recommendation will be part of a sweeping report the group will release Nov. 15 describing urban decline in York County and pitching solutions.

Metro-York was formed in March 2006 by prominent businesspeople to address problems in the city and surrounding areas. The group has set a broad agenda of fiscal, public-safety, land-use and educational challenges.

The Metro-York leadership is sifting through the findings of two working groups — one on education and one on municipal issues — to develop the final report.

Metro-York co-chairman Eric Menzer said the group would propose a short-term patch for city dropout rates, which he called an emergency with regional consequences.

York's William Penn Senior High School had 593 ninth-graders but only 251 seniors as of January 2006, according to a report on its Web site.

"Draw your own conclusions," Menzer said. City School Board President Jeffrey Kirdand did not return a telephone call by deadline.

Metro-York's long-term educational recommendations will focus on ways to reduce the concentration of poverty in schools, Menzer said.

"All of the experts are telling us that you cannot produce high-quality outcomes in high-poverty schools," he said. Menzer is a vice president at Wagman Construction Inc. in Manchester Township.

Metro-York is a project of York-Counts, a coalition that runs various initiatives to improve the county's quality of life. Metro-York leaders have repeatedly argued that urban problems are tied to the future prosperity of the region.

These problems have social and

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moral dimensions, but the economics alone make it important to act, said Joe Wagman, chief executive officer of Wagman Construction.

"If you just stood back and looked at them economically, they're very compelling arguments," Wagman said.

Metro-York leaders have said those economic arguments include the likelihood that urban poverty and fiscal distress would spread if left unchecked and that the region would miss out on an important labor pool if education is not improved.

Wagman co-chaired the municipal working group. He is also chairman of Better York, an influential civic group with about 70 business members.

Police departments in the York area have already begun discussing the possibility of merging, prompted by talks with the Metro-York group. On other municipal issues, the group is likely to propose more unified land-use planning and changes to the property-tax structure, though leaders declined to be more specific in advance of the November release. Some proposals will require legislative change in Harrisburg, they said.

Menzer said the educational proposals would likely be a tougher sell. York County residents have been vigorously debating mu-



Wagman

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Eric Menzer,  
Wagman  
Construction Inc.

### Dropping out

York City School District's middle schools and high school have a higher combined dropout rate than the state overall. Most students who drop out do so during high school. Here are the dropout rates for students in grades 7 through 12 in the 2005-06 school year:

York City School District: 4.6 percent  
2005-06 Pennsylvania total: 1.9 percent  
2005-06 York County total: 1.9 percent

The numbers skew higher for William Penn Senior High School students (grades 9-12 only):

Fall 2005 enrollment: 1,742  
2005-06 dropouts: 137  
2005-06 dropout rate: 7.9 percent

SOURCE: PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

municipal issues since the 1996 "Rusk Report" that diagnosed major urban problems, Menzer said. Educational issues have not received the same airing, and it's hard to gauge which proposals could gain traction or when, he said.

"I believe that there's going to be some sort of wandering in the wilderness," he said.

Metro-York intends to be ready. The group is not only putting together recommendations but also developing a volunteer and leadership structure that can start on implementation, Menzer said.

"It's going to be a report," he said, "and if we do it right, it's also going to be a plan." ■

### YOUR TAKE

Have an opinion about this issue? E-mail us at [edit@journalpub.com](mailto:edit@journalpub.com).