



Metro-York has advice

The organization looks for regional solutions to county problems.

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Nov 16, 2007 — Members of Metro-York say students could achieve better if school district boundaries are erased, at least for some schools, and if students from different socio-economic groups can intermingle.

Studies show that once a district's poverty level reaches 40 percent or higher, educational outcomes start to decline.

In the York City School District, 85 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, which under government classifications indicates they are living in poverty, a Metro-York report shows.

So the organization wants to break up that concentration of poverty to give students hope.

That was one of eight recommendations made public Thursday at a news conference held by Metro-York, a YorkCounts organization that looks for regional solutions to problems across the county.

One solution might be to develop a magnet school that would offer an international baccalaureate program to draw students from all over the county, said Sue Krebs, co-chairperson of a task force formed to address the issue.

The academic program prepares students for college and to ask challenging questions and communicate and understand people from other countries and cultures, according to the International Baccalaureate Web site.

By drawing suburban students to the special school, it might encourage middle-class families to move into the city in the long term, Krebs said. Eventually, parents might run for public office or get involved in school functions.

It would make a difference to students who have an ambition or dream but are not sure how to put a different kind of life together, Krebs said.

Of the group's recommendations, four involve municipal issues, and four deal with education. However, the issues overlap, said Eric Menzer, co-chairperson of Metro-York.

Offer new opportunities

One of the strategies for dealing with poverty involves offering new academic programming that would appeal to parents throughout York County and increase interaction between students who live in the city, suburban and rural communities.

Those ideas include the following:

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- A "student exchange" could allow individual students from the city to attend schools in the suburbs, or those from the suburbs to go to the city, for a limited period of time, such as one year. It would broaden academic experiences and break down barriers between people.

- A public magnet school could be open to students across York County and could be funded by the districts. It could be located centrally but apart from any existing school.

- A public school choice program could grant some number of York City kindergartners admission to other districts' elementary schools each year. Once there, they would receive special support to stay, without requiring a financial commitment from those districts.

But officials worried that only the most motivated students and parents would take advantage of those educational opportunities.

"We don't think that from a moral standpoint that you can simply say 'Let's provide a path out for the most motivated parents, and we'll leave the rest of the kids behind as victims of their circumstances,'" Menzer said.

So they looked at incentives for middle-class families to return to the city school district.

The Kalamazoo Promise serves as an example. The city school district in Kalamazoo, Mich., offers a free, four-year college education at a public university in the state for any student who

attends kindergarten through 12th grade in the district.

That can be a powerful incentive for families struggling with how they are going to afford college for their children, Menzer said.

"Could we replicate that exactly here or would we want to? Maybe not, probably not," he said. "But it is a great example of a really powerful incentive, and it's working. And middle income families are staying in and coming back to the Kalamazoo City School District, and there becomes a cumulative effect to that because, of course, that's a great way to deconcentrate poverty." **Increasing diversity**

Barry Schaad, whose brother York City Police Officer Henry Schaad was killed during the 1969 race riots in York, said he's concerned about education and how it relates to racism and the learning process.

Allowing students to choose where they go to school could be a better way for the community to understand other nationalities and lifestyles, he said.

But choice would likely mean more transportation of students, and he wonders who would cover the additional expense.

Tom Foust, York City School Board vice president, said he thinks there needs to be more mixing of economic classes of families into the district.

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The richest and the poorest students attended the city schools when he was growing up, and the district was racially diverse, Foust said.

"From that perspective, I think you got a much more rounded education because of the interrelationships you had with the racial groups and the economic groups," he said.

Some students in the city school district had mixed feelings about switching schools.

Chris Baskerville, a junior at William Penn Senior High School, said he would be willing to try it. More students are passing in the suburban schools.

Freshman J'La Kent, though, said she would not try another school. It wouldn't be the same.

Dallastown Area School District Supt. Stewart Weinberg heard the recommendations at a meeting Wednesday evening for municipal and school leaders.

He said that he is looking forward to talking about the ideas and that he thinks it's important that people not dismiss or accept them outright.

"Let's do something," he said. "Let's just not sit idly by and say there's nothing we can do."

ON THE WEB

Want to read the Metro-York report or learn more about the organization? Check it out at <http://www.yorkcounts.org>.

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Other recommendations

Here are the other seven recommendations made by Metro-York:

- Establish a Metro-York **consolidated police department** :

Work is already under way as a few area chiefs have expressed interest in the idea. York City, Spring Garden, Springettsbury, York Area Regional and West Manchester police departments are already engaged in conversation, but participation would ideally go beyond these departments.

Officials should establish a separate revenue source, such as a community safety tax, to help pay for the department. If it is financed through a special tax, it would no longer have to be paid for through municipal taxes.

- Engage in additional **meaningful regional planning**, ideally incorporating all of the municipalities in the heart of York County:

Regional planning would strengthen the York area's economy. State law already empowers communities to plan regionally.

Some communities have developed good plans

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within their own borders; others have established strong inter-municipal plans. Now the best of the existing plans should be coordinated, enhanced and integrated into a comprehensive plan for the region.

The plan should address land use, infrastructure, transportation and housing affordability (people should have choices for quality, affordable housing throughout the region no matter what their income level) and tax consequences.

- **Reform local taxation** through a local tax study commission:

The current system of property taxes - with inherent "winners and losers" - does not serve taxpayers or government and is not in the best long-term economic interest of the Metro-York region. It's also not the only way of doing things.

In greater Minneapolis/St. Paul, a portion of the real estate tax revenue from new commercial developments is shared across the region. Revenue could be distributed to municipalities based on their percentage of nonprofit real estate and/or to school districts based on the amount of residential real estate in their tax bases.

A local tax study commission should be established, to include elected officials from each municipality and school district in the region, to study and adopt an approach that is equitable and stable - and serve the region's long-term interests. Officials would also have

to ask the state delegation for legislation to permit adoption of a new tax model.

- Study ideas for **modernizing York County's form of government** :

The current structure and scope of county government might not meet the needs of a modern, changing county.

Are three commissioners enough to represent a county with more than 416,000 residents? Is county government as effective and accountable as it could be? Why have some of Pennsylvania's rapidly growing counties looked to change their form of county government while others have not?

While a municipal work group did not reach a consensus on exactly which form of government would be best for York County, participants agreed that it's time for a countywide task force to study the question seriously.

- Establish a permanent and well-funded **Metro-York Schools Consortium** to research, develop and implement new public school models and make sure all schools in York County are world-class:

No one district in the region is large enough to invest, on its own, in the type of research and development needed to create world-class schools.

One or more area colleges should convene a team of the best-and-brightest minds -

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superintendents and administrators, business leaders and others - to serve as a "think tank" focused on improving student performance, bolstering mentoring capacities, encouraging parental involvement and outlining cutting-edge curriculum that is aligned with workforce needs and unrestrained by time or geography.

The group will have to be funded to issue reports and recommendations of its own after extensive research and eventually push for implementation of ideas.

- Invest \$3 million per year for the next 10 years in "intensive care" **for at-risk students** : intense, targeted programming to at-risk students, as they enter grade school to keep them focused and/or middle and high school to keep them from thinking that dropping out is an option:

A sudden infusion of money won't fix the system, but it would help many students now. Hundreds of teenagers are dropping out of school, and hundreds of kindergartners are entering school under-prepared for learning.

There's also a socio-economic imperative; millions of dollars are being spent on a justice system that is dealing with a glut of dropouts. This is not a call to create a new program from scratch to address their needs; instead, this is an urgent call for investment in and the implementation of one or more existing programs identified as the best by education experts.

• Use the soon-to-be established **Office of Workforce Development** as a catalyst to strengthen relationships between employers and the Metro-York workforce:

It is imperative that pathways out of poverty be created for adults who find themselves alienated from employment today. A county Office of Workforce Development is being established at the York County Economic Development Corporation.

The recommendation is that the office not only support employers in the context of business needs and the county's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy. It must also create opportunities for potential employees, with an emphasis on reaching the hardest-to-serve, chronically underemployed, low-income populations - highlighting education and training programs and linking those who complete such programs with York County hiring managers.

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