



Attendees at YorkCounts summit give gloomy assessment of education

ANDREW SHAW - The York Dispatch

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YorkCounts got dozens of teachers, taxpayers, superintendents, lawmakers and other dignitaries together on Thursday to pose a question.

What is the state of York County schools?

Cover your eyes if you don't want to know the answer - those who spoke painted a dire picture.

As various officials detailed in their comments at the Pullo Center at Penn State York, the state of the schools is one of turmoil, financial disaster, educational dead-ends, and finger-pointing.

But Pennsylvania School Boards Association executive director Thomas Gentzel thinks York County, and the state, should seize the opportunity.

"We shouldn't waste this crisis. We should use it to shape what we want public education to be," Gentzel said.

Finding answers: YorkCounts, a nonprofit quality of life group, decided to make education its focus this year, as it already is planning to open York Academy Regional Charter School in York City this fall.

The K-2 school has received about 75 applications so far for its 225 openings, and will primarily serve Central York, York Suburban and York City students.

Although other summits will be held later this year to figure out solutions, Thursday's meeting of the minds was more about figuring out the real problems.

The findings were as widespread as the number of problems, with many people focused on the funding issue as the state faces a \$4 billion hole and districts likely will get much less state funding than expected.

"Your (educational) opportunity for children is dictated by the ZIP code you live in," said Rep. Eugene DePasquale, D-York City. "We have to throw out how we fund schools. We are in an archaic system."

And all the educational innovations in the world won't matter much if the pension crisis isn't solved, said Brian Jensen, the executive director of the Pennsylvania Economy League of Southwestern Pennsylvania, who joked he was the "harbinger of doom."

The league foresees a major financial crunch because the state and districts don't have



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enough money to fund the pension system, although recent legislation softened the expected contribution spike some. All of the big spending cuts to get through next year's budget may only get worse, said Dover Area School District Superintendent Robert Krantz.

"What happens after next year?" he asked the audience.

Taxing the Marcellus shale natural gas drilling - an idea that drew applause from the room - district consolidation and shifting funding more to state-driven taxes were some ideas discussed.

Academic help: There was also considerable discussion about what needs to be done in the classroom.

Schools should do more to help children with issues at home, according to keynote speaker Elaine Weiss, the national coordinator of Broader Bolder Approach to Education. The organization is a nonprofit, educational advocacy group focused on achievement gaps.

Standardized tests don't account for what a child's home life is like, she said.

"We don't know whether that student had a good breakfast, whether that student spent the previous night in the emergency room," Weiss said.

Feeding them dinner could go a long way to helping students succeed, she said. Rent subsidies have been used elsewhere, such as in Flint, Mich., she added.

Meanwhile, districts are so focused on standardized tests they are narrowing the curriculum at the expense of students, she said.

"They aren't learning history, they don't know where Mexico is, they aren't learning science," said Weiss.

How do you fix it? Weiss and others said there is no "silver bullet" solution for what ails Pennsylvania's education. A complex, politically difficult and exhaustive process will need to be done, they said.

Districts need to collaborate more to make teacher training more cost effective and useful, suggested Dayna Laur, a Central York High School teacher. Train people to train others, and the savings are substantial, she said.

Judy Higgins, an Eastern York School Board member, said cyber schools are draining local tax dollars. The state needs to change how cyber schools are funded and regulated, she said.

Rep. Will Tallman, R-Reading Township, is already working on pushing through a bill he thinks will address districts facing too many state mandates.

"We don't need someone in an ivory palace up there in Harrisburg telling school districts how to spend their money," Tallman said.

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