

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Education #1: Establishing a permanent and well-funded Metro-York Schools Consortium to research, develop and implement new public school models and make all schools in York County truly world-class.

Why is this a recommendation?

A recent Pittsburgh Business Times analysis of standardized test scores not only had the York City school district fourth from the bottom among all 501 Pennsylvania school districts, but also included not a single York County school district in the state's top 40.¹ Some of our schools are struggling, others are doing relatively well, but all face myriad challenges, including new performance demands and budget cuts, and none are the best in the state. We don't just want good schools – we want great schools, the best schools. All of our children, from South George Street to North Hopewell Township, deserve nothing less. So it's time for the county's school administrators, elected school board members, academic experts, parents and others to begin talking about how to make that a reality.

How did Metro-York reach the decision to include it?

Participants in the Metro-York Education Workgroup believed strongly in the value and importance of local control for schools. However, they recognized that combined resources can often be a force multiplier.

- One small local school district might not be able to offer many Advanced Placement courses. Several, pooling students and resources, could offer a full menu.
- A single district might not be able to afford a full-time teacher for a specialized but important subject, such as a computer programming technique or a foreign language. Several working together could hire such a teacher.
- Smaller school districts might have just one educator teaching a given subject at a given grade level, leaving him or her without any opportunity to collaborate with or learn from colleagues. A consortium of districts might present new opportunities for professional development.

The first step is to begin a conversation – to take a close look, together, at what's happening in the classrooms – learning from each other's best practices and detecting good and bad trends quickly.

What else can you tell us about it?

This idea received a major boost during the Metro-York conversation when Dr. George Waldner, the president of York College of Pennsylvania, said that York College could host such a consortium. This would present the group with ready access to experts in the field as well as a physical place to meet, centrally located and neutral to the many school districts that would be involved.

Where else is it being tried?

A lot of *logistical* coalitions exist, but we're still working to determine whether what YorkCounts proposes here has been tried anywhere else.

What happens next?

The champions of this recommendation will be approaching each of the county's 16 school districts and the School of Technology to identify one or more participants from each – and to start to develop an agenda. The intent is for this group to meet for the first time within several months.

What are, realistically, some obstacles this idea faces?

The biggest obstacle to ideas like this used to be the fear that having a joint conversation would lead down a path to school consolidation. However, this is no longer the case. First, a study commissioned for the Pennsylvania legislature revealed that full district mergers in York County would not produce cost savings,² so the demand for mergers is fading. Second, though, school districts have begun to find out that cooperating – in ways that are far short of consolidation – can save money and, most importantly, improve each district. Most of this joint work so far has been in areas like purchasing and insurance. What Metro-York proposes is a consortium that would talk not about those logistical concerns, but instead about cutting-edge classroom techniques to improve the student experience. So the only real obstacles are any individual district's unwillingness to participate... and the general need to secure enough funding to start up the consortium and keep it going.

1. Hicks, Larry. "Schools are not passing the test." *York Dispatch*, June 20, 2007. Available at <http://www.yorkcounts.org/metro/notpassing.pdf>.

2. Kauffman, Christina. "Study says York County schools too big to consolidate." *York Dispatch*, June 19, 2007. Available at <http://www.yorkcounts.org/metro/toobig.pdf>.