

School District Cooperation Frees Scarce Resources for Education

By Gerald Cross

There seems to be little good news these days for Pennsylvania's 500 school districts as they struggle to fund their budgets in the face of stagnating local revenues and increasing costs.

Looming ahead are additional financial stresses in the form of expected skyrocketing pension payments and potential higher health care costs from the Affordable Care Act.

The Pennsylvania Economy League has long cautioned that those simmering problems could force sharp cuts in student programs and services. A recent school district survey by the PA Association of School Administrators and the PA Association of School Business Officials found that many districts are being forced to increase class size, shrink course offerings, charge fees for extra-curricular activities, delay purchasing new textbooks and put off technology upgrades.

While sounding the warning, PEL has suggested sharing services as a way to mitigate district financial difficulties. The strategy can free up scarce resources to maintain or initiate programs and open opportunities for students to delve into subjects that their home district cannot afford to offer. Many districts across the state agree, and they have increasingly begun sharing everything from minor supply purchases to big ticket items.

"Sharing has always been there," noted David Davare, Ph.D., of PEL's Harrisburg office. "But as the dollars are getting tighter, sharing tends to get a second look."

Recent examples include a decision by Lackawanna County's Lakeland School District to contract with nearby Abington Heights School District for business manager services and efforts by the Antietam and Exeter Township School Districts in Berks County to explore, at a minimum, moving to more shared services.

They are not the only ones. The Lancaster Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 offers a collaborative purchasing program featuring goods that range from pencils and trashcan liners to electricity, food and insurance. Executive Director Dr. Cindy Burkhart noted in a recent WGAL TV interview that it's one of their fastest growing services.

"Our IU has always played a role in this area but the demand in terms of looking under every single rock so that school districts do not have to cut programs to kids has brought people more seriously to the table," she said.

Beaver County's Aliquippa and Hopewell School Districts have an agreement to share the technology director and business administrator. The county is also home to the Regional Choice Initiative, a Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit program that allows students to take courses at participating districts. That

means a student who wants to study Russian and AP Calculus but whose home district lacks the funds or student interest level to offer those courses can attend them at a neighboring district that does.

Three school districts in southwestern Pennsylvania — Jefferson-Morgan, Carmichaels and Southeastern Greene — explored a merger and instead decided to share transportation, a food services director and a curriculum coordinator.

Dr. Davare believes more opportunities exist. Food preparation could be done at one district and delivered to the cafeteria of a neighboring district. Districts could cooperate with municipalities, sharing snow removal duties or developing joint paving projects for school parking lots and municipal roads. Empty space in one school district could be leased by a cramped nearby district, resulting in one district gaining revenue and another forgoing an expensive building program.

As local budget dollars get tighter and property owners become more sensitive to tax hikes, district cooperation offers viable solutions. And with any collaborative effort permitted under the state Intergovernmental Cooperation Act as long as it's something both can do on their own, virtually the only limitation to school board members is their own imagination.

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