



Jenny Dericks



## Education

# Newton Mayor Asks Sparta Council to Support County School Consolidation Initiative



Newton Mayor Wayne Levante at a Newton Council meeting  
Jennifer Dericks

By JENNIFER DERICKS

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SPARTA, NJ – Newton Mayor Wayne Levante spoke at the Sparta Township Council meeting on Tuesday night asking for support for his initiative to have all New Jersey public schools consolidate at the county level.

Taking the microphone during public comment, Levante told the council members about his efforts to have all municipalities in the county pass a resolution supporting his initiative. While he ultimately wants schools consolidated into county schools, he said a resolution from Sparta asking for a study into the merits of the initiative would be a good first step.

After explaining his credentials as a former teacher in Paterson with “six certifications, four as a teacher and two at the administrative level including Business Administrator,” Levante said he was “trying to increase revenue and spur development.”

He said there is a lot of redundancy in the county. “Each of the 25 school districts have their own superintendents and his support staff and a business administrator and his support staff.”

Levanta said, “The public in Newton and the county are appalled when they hear about the expenditures.”

Some smaller districts in Sussex County and throughout the state have a principal that also serves as the Chief School Administrator fulfilling the duties of superintendent, according to the New Jersey Department of Education.

Levante pointed to large districts like Paterson, where schools have more students then compared to districts in Sussex. He said they are much larger and function with one superintendent and one business administrator.

A review of the [Paterson school district administration](#) shows a Superintendent’s Cabinet with an Acting State District Superintendent, Acting State Deputy Superintendent, Chief

of Staff, Business Administrator, Chief Data, Accountability and Technology Officer, Acting Chief Special Education Officer and four Assistant Superintendents. Additionally, there are seven Executive Directors and Associate Chiefs as well as 21 Directors. There are more than 25,000 students in the Paterson district according to the New Jersey Department of Education.

Levante said many states operate on a county model such as "Maryland, Mississippi and Florida. I know people say New Jersey has a high level of education but it's not about money. It's about the education at home.

"I'm not looking to destroy the public school system but have a study done to see what savings there would be," Levante said. "As an educator, I don't think it would change education."

Councilwoman Molly Whilesmith said, "Sparta has a school district that is ranked 114 nationally and I wouldn't want to change it. There is not any other school in the county even in the top 500. I'm so please with the Sparta schools. I'm only concerned about Sparta."

"A rising tide lifts all boats," Levante said. "I'm mostly focused on Newton too."

On the topic of creating a study Levante said "school boards won't do it, superintendents won't do it, County Superintendent Dr. Lamonte has not done it." He said Lamonte has been tasked by the state to conduct the study he is looking for and was even given a budget to do so.

Lamonte said, "Unfortunately neither the New Jersey Department of Education nor our Sussex County Office of Education budget has the funds for feasibility studies, despite what Mayor Levante may have stated."

Levante was asked several times about funding for his proposed study. He did not know how much it would cost but said "Trenton could find the money if all of the towns in the county asked to have it done." He offered several estimates from \$50,000 to \$200,000.

Lamonte said, at her invitation, she and County Business Administrator Neil Cramer met with Harvey Roseff who brought Levante, Dan Pagano and Gino Genovese to discuss "the potential benefits as well as possible financial drawbacks to school consolidation."

oseff ran for Byram Council and Sussex County Freeholder.

Lamonte said she and Cramer "emphasized that there are many school districts now sharing programs, services and personnel and that districts seem to find this preferable to consolidation since there are almost always financial winners and losers in a consolidation scenario."

Levante acknowledged Newton, Green and Andover had discussed consolidation but that "Green was going to be the loser," with "no tax savings" for the taxpayers in Green.

"As per current statutes, regionalization requires voter approval of all constituent sectors of the school districts involved," Lamonte said. "It is extremely difficult to gain voter approval if taxes will go up for a specific district."

Councilman Josh Hertzberg said the township and the school district have a good relationship of shared services. "We haven't seen savings with shared services county wide," Hertzberg said.

"I'm perturbed that some don't even want to exam it," Levante said.

"In Sparta we would want a specific study for Sussex County for us to support it," Hertzberg said.

"As a council we are always looking for ways to save taxpayers of Sparta money," Mayor Gil Gibbs said. "Members need to talk to the community and the board of education before making a decision."

"Be wary of the school board because no one is going to advocate getting rid of their job," Levante said.

Councilwoman Christine Quinn asked about the relevance of the current [state] administration "looking at the funding formula to get more money for non-Abbott districts. Is something coming in on a higher level from the secretary of education?"

Levante had spoken about "drawing attention to Sussex County" and "getting some of the Abbott money to come back to the county."

"Sussex County is being neglected," Levante said. "It's about time they pay attention to it," as he explained he is "getting calls to speak in Trenton" on the topic.

Levante said Senator Steve Oroho has introduced legislation to the senate on the issue. According to Levante this legislation had unanimous support in the Senate but stalled in the Assembly. He said it was not a partisan issue.

Lamonte said she understood Levante favored a "county-wide school system. This would require legislative changes to current statutes, particularly because a county-wide system would eliminate the local home rule system that currently exists in New Jersey."

Newton, Sussex Borough and Green have already adopted resolutions, according to Levante. He said he is going to every municipality in the county to ask for support for his initiative.

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