

Newton mayor proposes consolidating schools

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 PHOTO BY MARK LICHTENWALNER Newton Mayor Wayne Levante addresses the Sussex Borough Council.

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SUSSEX BOROUGH — Newton Mayor Wayne Levante has a novel approach to cutting education costs in Sussex County, and school administrators aren't going to like it.

Sussex county school superintendents and their administrations have been facing the reality of declining student enrollment for several years. And with some districts losing as much as 40 percent to 50 percent of their student populations, justifying big-dollar school budgets, and the big salaries that go along with them, to the taxpayers has possibly become the biggest challenge school administrators face.

Some districts, such as High Point, and their superintendent Scott Ripley, have had to resort to laying off staff in an attempt to curb ballooning budgets. Ripley announced the elimination of 16 staff positions at High Point earlier this year in an effort to help cut \$1.2 million from this year's school budget.

Other districts, like Vernon with their superintendent Art DiBenedetto, have suggested closing entire schools. The plan to sell or shutter Cedar Mountain school in Vernon was scrapped after significant community backlash. Instead, the board agreed to a restructuring of grade levels among the six Vernon school buildings. The district offices will move into the Walnut Ridge building, along with an expanding Pre-K program. Vernon has actually begun to see an uptick in student enrollment in the kindergarten and first grade levels. But, Vernon still faces some serious challenges, with high school enrollment expected to dip below 1,000 this year, roughly 1,800 students less than its high a decade ago.

Mayor Levante, a math teacher in the Newark public schools, gave a presentation to the Sussex Town Council proposing an alternative means of saving school districts in Sussex County money, fire the administrators.

“Taxes are a major issue,” Levante said. “People are leaving the county.”

“Some municipalities have 500, maybe 1,000 kids, and they’ll have all this overhead,” Levante continued. “Superintendents, principals and vice-principals — an entire school business office for 1,500 students.”

Levante then compared the entirety of Sussex County to the Jersey City School system.

“Jersey City has 24,000 students and one superintendent. They break the city up into four clusters, each managed by an assistant superintendent, and there’s one business office,” Levante said.

“What we have here in Sussex County is 22,000 students, 25 superintendents, 25 school business administrators, and 25 sets of human-resource personnel; 25 of everything that goes with a school system.”

“Collectively, we can do better with a consolidated school system,” Levante said as he summed up his pitch.

Levante plans to visit every municipality in Sussex County to ask for a resolution be passed to support a consolidated school system, and to request an audit, or study be conducted for the benefit of state legislatures to see if consolidating every school in Sussex County is even possible.

The Sussex Borough Council unanimously and enthusiastically passed resolution 2017-125R in support of Mayor Levante’s proposal.

Council member Linda Masson stated, “I think this is so important that we try to do something for our taxpayers. It’s obvious, for years that solutions are not going to come from the schools so it needs to come from the towns.”

“Consolidation makes perfect sense,” said Council member Mario Poggi. “Business’ do it all the time.”

“Quite honestly, it’s like everyone is on the take,” Poggi added. “Nothing against teachers, but 25 superintendents is ridiculous. There has to be a smarter way to do it, we need to see less taxes.”

“We’re legislators, we change the laws. We could revamp the system any way we want,” Levante said in closing, before rushing off to give the same presentation to another Sussex County municipality.