

NEWS

Sussex Borough Council supports school consolidation

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SUSSEX BOROUGH -- The Borough Council has become the second municipal governing body in Sussex County to endorse Newton Mayor Wayne Levante's call for a consolidated county-wide public school system.

The 6-0 vote by the Borough Council, whose resolution Tuesday was expected to be followed by the passage of a similar resolution by the governing body of Green Township late Wednesday night, was modeled on a resolution passed by the Newton Town Council on Aug. 14.

Tuesday's vote by the Sussex Borough Council followed a nearly 20-minute address by Levante to the council earlier that night.

Levante, a public school teacher of nearly 10 years who currently teaches middle school mathematics in Newark, suggested a county-wide school district with a single superintendent modeled on the structure of other large urban districts would go a long way toward reducing administrative overhead and ultimately reducing taxes.

"What we have here in Sussex County is 22,000 students with 25 superintendents and 25 school business administrators with a cost that is anywhere between \$7 million and \$9 million in income and benefits just for those individuals," Levante said. "Why do we need all this excessive administrative staff to manage a county system that has 22,000 students, which is the equivalent of Jersey City, Paterson, Newark and those bigger districts?"

"To me, it just doesn't make sense," he said.

Levante said in his hometown of Newton, which has about 1,500 students, the salary being paid to Newton's superintendent, Ken Greene, is over \$180,000. He said, by contrast, that the superintendent of Paterson is being paid between \$210,000 and \$220,000 to oversee a school district of 22,000 students.

Levante said Jersey City, where he grew up, has a single system of about 24,000 students headed by one superintendent with one school business office. The city school district, in turn, is broken into four clusters, each of which is administered by an assistant superintendent.

"This can also work in Sussex County -- one county superintendent, then break the county up into north, south, east and west clusters," Levante said.

"If we went to a model like they have in Paterson or Jersey City or Newark (with) one superintendent and four assistant superintendents and one business administrator, we're talking about a (total) salary of maybe \$1 million," he said. "Right there that's \$6 million to \$7 million in savings, and that doesn't even count all the other secretaries and technology coordinators and human resource personnel and everything else that goes with running a school system."

Levante said he would like to see a feasibility study done to explore the possibility of creating an administrative structure of this type for Sussex County.

Levante further suggested those from Sussex County fearful of importing the challenges faced by Newark, Jersey City, and other large urban districts -- and who would therefore dismiss the idea of looking to those districts for a model that could work here -- were missing a larger picture.

"Being that I'm from the Jersey City Public Schools and was a teacher in Paterson, and now I'm a teacher in Newark, I can attest just from being a professional in the industry that those systems aren't struggling or suffering because of bad teaching or bad management," he said. "It's simply because of the poor family environments that are there and because of socioeconomic issues that are really making education difficult in those environments."

He added: "I understand everyone is concerned about home rule and is afraid of losing their identity, but I'm also talking to people that are afraid of losing their homes (because of high taxes)."

Levante suggested the shortfalls and further reductions in state aid looming for many school districts could be a catalyst for undertaking a study on the topic of school consolidation.

"The discussion has to be had," he said.

Still, given what he perceives as the current inefficiencies in the way public education is administered, Levante said he was not upset by the recent round of state aid reductions experienced by Vernon and other local school districts.

"I'm actually happy about it (the loss of state aid) because if my children are wasting money, why would I give them more? Clean up the mess first and then we'll sort out what type of money should go to the county," he said.

He emphasized, however, that as a public school teacher himself, he was not seeking to undermine public schools or teachers.

"I'm the product of public schools, my wife is a product of the public schools, and my daughter's in public school," Levante said. "This is not an attack on teachers. ... This is an attack on redundant government services."

Sussex Borough Councilwoman Linda Masson, who has championed Levante's proposal, said the K-8 Sussex-Wantage Regional School District has seen its student population decline by about 40 percent, from 1,600 to a current total just over 1,000. "And yet we're not seeing it in our taxes at all," she said.

Instead, she said, "the school boards and superintendents act like because they're allowed 2 percent (in tax hikes) over the previous year and because they don't take it, they think they're wonderful -- and they're not looking at the fact that they've lost all these students."

Sussex Borough Councilman Mario Poggi echoed her comments.

"Consolidation makes sense," Poggi said. "Businesses do it all the time and have stockholders to answer to. The Board of Education should have taxpayers to answer to."

Levante, in his comments, suggested the initiative he is proposing needs to begin at the municipal level.

"The buck stops with the mayor," he said. "Even though we have no control over the school board, we're the first ones people come to when their taxes go up. We're all working harder (to do more with less). In the school system, they have to work just as hard."

Levante has taken his message to other municipalities including Byram and Hopatcong. He said in the near future, he plans to address the governing bodies of several more municipalities including, but not limited to, Andover Township, Fredon, Sparta and Wantage.

Still, in order to get traction, the proposal -- which has been championed on the state level by an organization called "Courage to Connect" -- could face an uphill climb.

In a recent email to the New Jersey Herald, Ken Nelson -- a Wantage resident and former board member of the High Point Regional High School district -- lamented his failure to persuade a majority of his fellow board members to sign on to the concept.

"Maybe I gave up too easily," Nelson said. "However, the resistance that I encountered from the High Point staff and my fellow board members was both breathtaking and very discouraging."

Among the additional hurdles a consolidation effort would face would be the state requirement that all teachers absorbed into a consolidated school district be placed on a uniform salary guide. Nelson said that because High Point's salaries are higher than those in neighboring districts, "it is almost a certainty that the savings in administrative costs would be offset by higher teacher salaries" in a consolidated district.

"(The state) Legislature could make the consolidation process easier to achieve. However, it is doubtful if they have the courage to do so," Nelson said.

Levante, however, suggested a show of support by municipalities could be an important first step toward doing so. "At least (then) we can go to Steve Oroho and Parker Space, or whoever's in the Senate and Assembly in the next few months, and say here is what my constituents in Sussex County want to see done, and they realize it's a problem and we need to get to work on it."

Masson agreed such an initiative could succeed if municipalities band together in support.

"It's not going to come from the schools, so it has to come from the towns," she said.

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