

# Why this N.J. county thinks it needs just 1 school district

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An unprecedented proposal to create a county-wide public school district in the rural northwestern corner of New Jersey is drawing notice.

The Newton Town Council unanimously passed a resolution Aug. 14 calling for a "Consolidated Sussex County School System."

Sussex County is home to 25 public school districts and enrolls approximately 21,000 students, ranking 17th out of the state's 21 counties as of the 2015-16 school year.

During the past decade, rural areas such as Sussex [have been losing population](#) in a trend that is expected to continue.

Newton Mayor Wayne Levante, who is starting a new job Sept. 5 as a public school teacher in Newark, has emerged as the leading advocate for a Sussex County-wide school district.

"I think Sussex County would be a great model for a consolidated system," Levante said.

Here is a look at the proposal:

## **Why even consider such a thing?**

The major reason for consolidation: To save money.

Per-pupil costs are rising in the county despite decreasingly enrollment, resulting in higher property taxes, according to the Newton resolution.

Levante said a consolidated district would reduce school administrative costs in Sussex County by anywhere from \$6 million to \$9 million annually.

Some school buildings might close as a result, Levante said.

He added that local school boards could still exist, with board presidents perhaps serving on an advisory committee for the county superintendent.

Newton Mayor Wayne Levante during a Town Council meeting in Newton, Aug. 28, 2017 (Rob Jennings / NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

### **How it would work**

The Newton resolution calls for having one county superintendent, one county business office, and all schools within the county overseen by the county office.

Levante, a former teacher in Paterson, drew a parallel to the set-up in New Jersey's third-largest city.

"I worked in Paterson ... It's like 50-something schools. You have one superintendent," Levante said.

The Merriam Avenue School in Newton (Courtesy of Newton school district)

### **Impact on class size and teachers?**

Levante said he did not believe class size would increase in a county-wide district, but acknowledged he had not closely evaluated that part of his proposal.

As for teachers, Levante said that while it would not necessarily lead to job losses, it could result in educators being more easily transferred to other schools, or even to different municipalities.

"It's needed," Levante said.

### **How is this playing with superintendents?**

Levante said he is not expecting any support, either from superintendents or school boards.

"I'm not even bothering asking," Levante said.

"Superintendents aren't going to advocate for eliminating their jobs. School business administrators aren't going to advocate for eliminating their jobs. School boards are not going to want to just get rid of their power," Levante said.

Newton Schools Superintendent Ken Greene speaking at a Town Council meeting in Newton, Aug. 28, 2017 (Rob Jennings / NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

### **What about in Newton?**

Newton Superintendent Ken Greene declined comment when asked about it by a reporter during the Aug. 28 council meeting, where he appeared to discuss an upcoming school construction referendum.

The K-12 district enrolls about 1,500 students.

Senate President Steve Sweeney, right, listens as Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto opens a joint session of the N.J. Legislature in Trenton, Feb. 16, 2016 (Aristide Economopoulos / NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

### **How might this move forward?**

Levante, a Republican, said is going directly to the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

"I think the legislators can rewrite the laws and make this happen," Levante said.

### **Odds of success?**

Not good. A less-dramatic proposal that would simply create a task force on studying school consolidation gained unanimous support from the Senate in 2016, but remains mothballed in an Assembly committee.

"I know it's an uphill battle," Levante said.

Assemblyman Parker Space, R-24th District, with Sen. Steve Oroho, R-24th District, and former Labor Commissioner Hal Wirths - running for Assembly on a ticket with Space and Oroho - celebrating their Republican primary victory in Sparta, June 6, 2017 (Rob Jennings / NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

### **Where in Trenton might he find support?**

Perhaps from the five Republican Assembly sponsors of the "Empower the Principal Act," which would eliminate all local superintendents and assistant superintendents and transfer their duties to executive county superintendents.

The bill, introduced in Feb. 2016, remains before the Assembly Education Committee and there is no companion legislation in the Senate.

Assemblyman Parker Space, whose district includes Newton, issued a statement Aug. 27 lauding the Newton proposal.

"I applaud the Newton Town Council for standing up for beleaguered taxpayers in this State by asking for action to reduce school costs," said Space, R-24.

### **Is there a fallback position?**

Levante said he would be pleased if state lawmakers simply agreed to explore his proposal.

"At least give it a study," Levante said.

### **What's next?**

Levante is trying to convince other municipal governing bodies in Sussex County to support the Newton resolution.

He said he is scheduled to speak Sept. 5 in Sussex Borough, Sept. 11 in Andover Township, Sept. 12 in Sparta, Sept. 14 in Fredon and and Sept. 28 in Wantage.

"I have to see if municipal leaders are going to step up and support this," Levante said.

From left to right, Newton Deputy Mayor E. Kevin Elvidge, Mayor Wayne Levante and Councilwoman Helen LeFrois during a Town Council meeting in Newton, Aug. 28, 2017 (Rob Jennings / NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

### **Who is Wayne Levante?**

Levante, 38, an 11-year Newton resident, is a married father of two young daughters.

He grew up in Jersey City and was a public teacher in Paterson for nine years, leaving in 2012.

He was recently hired as a seventh and eighth-grade math teacher in the Newark public school district. His first day is Sept 5.

Levante was elected to a four-year term on the Newton council in 2014 and, in July, was named mayor.

Newton has non-partisan elections, in which political parties play no official role, and the position of mayor is rotated among council members.

"I'm just trying to start a discussion here," Levante said of his support for a county-wide school district.

Levante said he has decided to run for a second term in 2018. His term expires at the end of June.

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