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## Worth taking a look at school consolidation

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To Newton Mayor Wayne Levante, high property taxes driven by schools are much like the weather: Everybody talks about them, but nobody does anything about them (to paraphrase the quote usually attributed to Mark Twain).

But Levante is determined to shed some sunlight on the subject and at least get solid information to determine what savings could be achieved in Sussex County through school regionalization or consolidation.

Last week the Newton Town Council unanimously passed a resolution supporting a Sussex County Consolidated School System, something that has not officially been proposed.

The resolution also was forwarded to the clerks of all Sussex County municipalities, local state legislators, the county superintendent of schools, county and state leagues of municipalities, and the governor's office, as well as the Newton Board of Education.

Levante himself has sent letters to other mayors and is attending as many municipal meetings as possible to elicit support for a study to examine the possible savings. And he has been encouraged by the reception he has been getting so far.

Locally, the school portion of property taxes amounts to around 65 percent of the total bill.

An often-repeated concern -- make that complaint -- is that enrollment countywide has been declining without a commensurate reduction in expenses.

Levante sees potential -- and substantial -- savings by trimming upper and mid-level administration expense achievable through consolidation.

He wants to be clear that that's where he sees the lowest hanging fruit.

"First and foremost, let me say that this resolution is not an attack on teachers," he writes in his letter. He goes on to introduce his credentials, which include being a former teacher, former union delegate,

member of various school committees and possessing six certifications including two for school administration. He is also the parent of a child in the public school system.



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Defending the teacher piece of the equation, Levante surmises the majority of money "is not going towards educating children but instead going towards massive overhead." He concludes, "redundant administrators, business office staff, and other personnel throughout the county are the real problems creating a drain on Sussex County taxpayers."

Though not part of the town's resolution nor spelled out in his letter to other mayors, Levante believes Sussex County could be divided into quadrants with a single superintendent and four assistant superintendents. The consolidated system would have one business office and could establish thematic buildings, use economy of scale and collaborate.

School consolidation, regionalization and extreme shared services are certainly worth examining.

A thorough feasibility study likely will not provide all the answers, but it's better than talking about high taxes and doing nothing about them.

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