



January 14, 2012

## Educators across New York considering regional schools

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A study into the possibility of a regional high school in Ontario County is just the latest example of a broad effort by state educators to save money and improve academic opportunities for students.

Since 2005, New York's Department of State has awarded about 50 grants to school districts to study the issue. Many of the grants funded the early planning for efforts to combine facilities, services and educational programs among school districts, and sometimes with municipalities.

Creating a new system that combines resources is considered an efficient method of saving money and improving the quality of education. Regional high schools are considered an alternative to complete district consolidation because research has shown that consolidations often do not produce the anticipated savings.

The concept is gaining strength as school districts are struggling financially and trying to hold down property taxes, especially now that a cap on tax increases has been imposed. At the same time, state and federal aid is declining. Dwindling enrollments in many places are making it more difficult for districts to justify funding many non-mandated academic programs.

Regional high schools have the backing of the state's BOCES superintendents, the state Board of Regents, the Rural Schools Association of New York State, and the New York state Commission on Government Efficiency and Competitiveness.

In Ontario County, preliminary research has shown that a regional high school system could save more than \$4 million just from cuts to teaching staff. The new system could also help address inequalities among the county's nine school districts.

"We believe that exploring regional high schools can provide a middle ground of maintaining local control of education, community identity, while still reducing the cost of education in rural communities," the Ontario County study plan says.

A final version of the Ontario County study, covered by a \$50,000 grant, is not expected before March.

### **Exploring the idea**

The only place in the state with a regional high school is Suffolk County. The state had allowed the regional model until 1944, when it was rescinded. The state Legislature passed a law in 1981 to permit the regional high school only in Suffolk County. Now, state Sen. Catharine Young, R-Olean, has sponsored a bill that would change state law and allow the formation of regional high schools in the area she represents. Educators in several Chautauqua County school districts have been bouncing around the idea of a regional high school since the mid-1980s.

Young also is sponsoring another bill that would permit regional high schools statewide. Other states, including Massachusetts and New Jersey, allow regional high schools.

Locally, Wayne County schools also investigated the possibility of a regional high school. The Wayne County study, paid for with a \$45,000 grant, was completed in July 2010. Educators there are not actively pursuing a countywide high school system, but the effort has resulted in some sharing of services among districts there.

"While we don't have regional high schools in Wayne County, and there hasn't been any further discussion about creating a regional high school, as resources continue to tighten up, that could come back," said Joseph Marinelli, superintendent of Wayne-Finger Lakes Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

Former Fairport Superintendent Bill Cala, who served briefly as interim Rochester schools superintendent, has spearheaded an effort to create a metropolitan high school in Monroe County.

Cala said he worked for two years with a group of about 150 volunteers to create a plan for the school "and it's ready to go." The cooperation and support of the Rochester school district is necessary, but high turnover in the superintendent's position over the past few years has complicated the effort.

"It's like every time we make progress on it and get some agreements, there's a rollover," Cala said.

In St. Lawrence and Lewis counties, 18 school districts completed a study in October that explores several ideas, including the possibility of regional high schools. Their state grant application was rejected so the districts shared the \$130,000 cost.

Thomas Burns, superintendent of the St. Lawrence-Lewis BOCES, said regional high schools are an inevitable result of dwindling enrollments, financial pressures and increased emphasis on academic performance.

"It has reached a point where it's not a question of how much support will there be for regional high schools. We need to find a new way to do business and deliver a better education system for high school students. And if we don't, we're going to go out of business," said Burns.

"We're not too many years away from the state or Gov. Cuomo interceding and saying now you have to do this. We like our way of life and our region and our schools. So if we can have input on reconfiguring them, we'd rather do that," said Burns.

### **In Ontario County**

By 2019, high school enrollment in Ontario County is expected to drop from 5,700 to about 5,200. All the districts will lose students except Victor, where high school enrollment is expected to grow about 18 percent, to 1,500.

In just the next two years, state and federal aid to the Ontario County districts is expected to decline by \$27 million. In addition to staff cuts, programs and services will likely be reduced and eliminated in the districts that already cut more than 320 workers in the past three years. This will lead to increased class sizes, fewer course choices and less professional development for teachers.

In Ontario County, researchers are exploring two possible models for a countywide high school system. One approach aims to create high schools with enrollments in the target range of 800 to 1,000, and use distance learning options. The second model emphasizes reduced travel time to school.

The first model would establish five regional high schools, eliminating high schools in the Bloomfield, Naples, Midlakes and Manchester-Shortsville (Red Jacket) districts. This plan would require about 79,500 square feet of additions to the Honeoye and Marcus Whitman schools at a total cost of about \$20 million. But with state aid, the actual local cost would be about \$2 million.

The second model, geared toward keeping travel time close to a target of 30 minutes, would establish six high schools, eliminating high schools in Bloomfield, Midlakes and Red Jacket. This model would require about 126,400 square feet of additions at Canandaigua and Geneva high schools, at a cost of \$32 million. State aid would reduce the local cost to \$3.2 million.

"A regional high school could create many additional educational opportunities for students because of economies of scale," according to the outline for the Ontario County study being conducted by the Center for Governmental Research.

The new system could help address the inequalities that now exist among Ontario County's school districts. Graduation rates, for example, range from 73 percent in Geneva to 99 percent in the Bloomfield Central School District. High school sizes range from 265 students in Red Jacket to 1,261 in

Victor. The number of courses offered by the high schools ranges from 77 in Bloomfield to 132 in Canandaigua.

CGR is due to deliver its report in March. Researchers emphasize that the study is speculative and no action is required once the report is done. Many steps, including state legislation, are required before a regional high school district could be created.

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