

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **1. What is the difference between a "merger" and "consolidation"?**

The terms are often used interchangeably when discussing the issue; however, merger and consolidations have slightly different formal meanings. School consolidation is the wholesale reduction in the number of school districts, which includes the elimination of duplicate programs and the elimination of staff. School mergers, which is more applicable to Pennsylvania, is the combination of two or more districts with the intent of eliminating an administrative group and/or duplicate programs deemed unnecessary to provide quality educational services.

Consolidation implies that a government entity has the power to merge districts and guide the process as it sees fit (requiring merger), while the term merger implies the voluntary merging of two or more school districts or school entities on their own volition.

### **2. What are the benefits of mergers in Pennsylvania to students and parents?**

- Increased educational opportunities from an expanded array of curriculum, extracurricular activations, and options for curriculum choice to meet students' needs.
- Larger districts afford their students with a more varied curriculum and are better able to individual educational programs (i.e. through IEPs for students in special education programs, enrichment programs, and students with learning disabilities).
- Larger districts could provide more specialized pupil services that smaller districts are often unable to provide due to a lack of funding or personnel (source: PA Legislative Study by Standards and Poors)

### **3. What are the benefits of mergers to residents of the district (taxpayers)?**

- Smaller schools (often those with less than 1,000-1,500 pupils) are often less cost efficient, which could affect local taxes.
- Reorganization of school districts can create new schools as a community center, particularly in rural areas.
- Smaller schools are often less cost efficient (source: PA Legislative Study by Standards and Poors)
- With a declining tax base in many small districts, merging with another district could increase the overall tax base and reduce the reliance on this declining base and state funds (source: Center & Monaca Study)

### **4. What are the benefits to a school district?**

- Smaller schools are often less cost efficient.
- Equalization of educational opportunities is enhanced
- Local control is diluted when "district sharing" is a solution to declining opportunities and enrollment, as opposed to a merger where a new organizational structure that is better suited for the long term is put into place.
- Through reorganization staff could be used more effectively, efficiently and maximized.
- By sharing services, control must continually be shared, diluting local control, which doesn't always work out because of issues collaborating.

### **5. Why is Pennsylvania interested in consolidating the number of school districts?**

Full-scale school consolidation could provide an effective way to relieve citizens across the Commonwealth of the local property tax burden. Maintaining 500 separate districts, each with its own staggering, and rising administrative costs creates an added burden to the Pennsylvania tax payer. Through this purview, a reduction in the number of school districts would not necessitate the closure of

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individual schools, but rather improve the efficacy and efficiency of public education through other means. There are only 9 states in the nation that have a greater number of school districts than Pennsylvania. (Source Education Commission of States (ECS) State Comparisons/Statistics).

### **6. How will the school board operate through the merger process?**

A unified board of 18 members that includes both districts involved in the merger process will need to be in place and stay in place until the first round of elections after the completion of the merger. Moreover, both boards will be required to obtain a majority of their members to vote in favor of the merger and cooperate throughout the merger and act as one unit until the new board for the combined district is elected.

### **7. What will happen to the school boards following the merger? How will each district be represented on the new board?**

There are two forms of representation which could take place following the merger: at-large or zoned representation. In a district with at-large representation there would be nine members from one district, much like the way that most school boards are organized in the Commonwealth today. Zoned representation would be based on current district boundaries, with for example 3 coming from one half and 6 from the other based on the current student body from each district.

### **8. What options are given to the school board and what are the first steps?**

The first steps taken by a school board that would like to consider the option of a merger with a neighboring district should begin with an open discussion amongst the school board members of both districts. A feasibility study should be carried out to examine the process between the districts to determine the timeline for a potential merger, the associated costs, and to examine the future enrollment as well as the projected savings of a combined district. Conducting a feasibility study is the key first step to evaluating whether a merger could work as an effective way of maintaining educational opportunities while saving money for both districts.

### **9. Will increased busing be needed for the students in a newly merged district**

If buildings are not consolidated and for example, separate middle schools or separate high schools are maintained, whether initially or in the long-run, the busing patterns could remain relatively unchanged.

If buildings are consolidated under a merger (i.e. moving from two high schools to one), new busing patterns will be developed and implemented. This could result in bus rides across a portion of the district for some students. However, contracts for busing will be negotiated as part of the process to combine the existing busing efforts of the separate districts. The result would be more efficient busing patterns that would benefit students residing in all parts of the district.

### **10. How will high schools function within the community? Will all "neighborhood schools" be eliminated? What about the school mascot, colors, and coaching staffs for sports?**

The high school(s) will continue and become new community centers, serving as a focal point for the newly merged communities. In many cases, more rural communities already share a sense of identity with the communities around them and the merger of two school districts could easily bring several communities together.

Regarding "neighborhood schools," busing may be needed; therefore, not all students would be attending a middle school or high school within walking distance from their home. This is not the purpose of the merger though; it is to ensure that equal and better educational opportunities are available to all the students across the district.

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The newly merged district will be responsible for the selection of the new mascot and school colors. A possibility to involve the students would be a competition to create a new mascot, slogan, and selection of colors, which would allow the students a hand in the merger of the schools. Because coaching falls under the same arena as staffing, it will have to be dealt with in a similar fashion; however, this is only a short-term effect of the merger. The previous head coaches may be able share the coaching responsibilities for the first few years or so, or one coach will have to relinquish their title as the head coach.

### **11. What type of One Time Costs (OTCs) will school districts face as a result of a merger?**

While the benefits of a merger between two or multiple school districts can save thousands and even millions of dollars per year after a merger, there are some onetime costs (OTCs), which a newly merged school district can incur. Some of these costs include textbooks, athletic or band uniforms, and renovations to athletic facilities if only one high school is maintained to reflect the district's new identity. Other OTCs include information technology infrastructure, legal fees, social integration, substitute personnel, new signage, and labor contracts; however, without a merger many of these OTCs would have existed because of their eventual need for upgrades. (source: *Center-Monaca Merger - Update/One Time Cost Narrative*)

Yet, even though onetime costs will be incurred because of school mergers to create a new identity for the schools and as a means of creating a quality educational environment to unify the new districts, the it is anticipated the savings per year after merger will outweigh the costs of the OTCs. Hence, putting the onetime costs aside that are necessary to facilitate a merger, the overall enhancement of educational opportunities and reduction in costs can make a merger successful with savings realized.

### **12. What kind of support will be provided to school districts looking to form a merger from the Pennsylvania Department of Education?**

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) would provide support for the merger of two school districts as they prepare for negotiation and recognition by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education. IPDE will also provide legal counsel and assistance to the solicitors of the school districts as they enter into the merger process.

### **13. How will a merger help those districts facing financial difficulties?**

A school district merger could serve as a means for districts facing financial difficulties because of a declining tax base or enrollment. A merger may allow these school districts to provide quality access and opportunity in education, without continuing to strain the tax base within the existing district. Through two or more districts merging together, the onetime costs and adjustments to the newly formed district could most certainly outweigh the costs of operating and continuing to operate a financially distressed school district in the future.

### **14. How will taxes be affected as a result of a merger?**

The issue of local property taxes will most definitely be an issue when considering a merger between two school districts. Moreover, it is almost guaranteed that one district will have slightly lower or higher taxes than the other, because no two districts are the same. Under a merger, the millage could be equalized to reach a median between the two or the lower district could be brought up to match the district with the higher mill rate. In the 2008 merger of Center and Monaca school districts they chose the latter option, by slightly raising Monaca's mill rate while maintaining Center's, instead of reducing it, to provide additional funds for One Time Costs and personnel.

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### **15. How will budgeting for the next school year be dealt with as the merger takes place?**

A joint budgeting committee will be established to design and propose a budget with the expectation that the new district will be established and come to fruition. Likewise, budgets should also be completed for the next year if the merger is not done before the end of the fiscal year. Schools districts interested in a merger should establish a joint- budgeting committee as soon as they choose to explore the possibility and feasibility of consolidation.

### **16. How will personnel be affected as a result of a merger?**

The result of a merger will likely result in a reduction in the administrative personnel needed to operate what would have been two separate districts. Furthermore, in regard to teaching staff, the proposed new district will be required to assess the number of teachers needed based on current enrollment and enrollment projections. From this assessment of staffing needs the newly formed school district will need to determine what teaching positions are needed and how to be fill each position, considering seniority, certification, and educational needs. However, the issue of staffing is solely dependent on the school districts seeking to merge and their enrollment and demonstrated need

### **17. How will a school district merger affect Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), School Performance Profile and Future Ready PA Index**

While schools are in the process of discussing a merger, it will remain unchanged. Once the merger is completed, if there is a reconfiguration of schools, this could have impact on performance and growth and the Future Ready PA Index.

### **18. Can the districts choose July 1 as the effective date of the merger and decide to use that current school year as a transition year with each district functioning as a separate entity under the direction of the combined boards?**

Under the law, the districts do not have the option of choosing a date upon which their consolidation (the term used in the School Code) becomes effective. That will be determined by the State Board of Education.

In addition, the law does not allow for a "transition year" as contemplated by the question. Once combined, the districts and their boards will be one and the district will have to designate one superintendent of record. However, if the combined board chooses to delay and stagger other aspects of the consolidation, it can certainly do so. Such matters would include but not be limited to: how administrative and fiscal functions are joined, how students are reassigned among the district's buildings, which facilities are to be abandoned, etc.

### **19. What Sections of the Law and Tax Codes Affect School Mergers?**

School districts are governed by the Pennsylvania Public School Code of 1949 as amended, Regulations of the State Board of Education, and standards of the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

- 24 P.S. § 2-224, establishes the following procedures: 1) A majority (5) of both boards is required; 2) An application must be filed with the Secretary of Education; 3) The State Board of Education must approve the application; 4) The Secretary of Education issues a certificate creating the new school district, including the district name, components, classification, and date effective.
- 24 PS §2-225 states in part that all property and indebtedness of the former components become the property and indebtedness of the new district.
- 24 PS §2-226 states in part when changes in districts become effective.

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- 24 PS §2-227 contains the procedures and time requirements for filing with the Secretary of Education.
- 24 PS §2-228 contains the criteria for approval or disapproval of the creation of a district.
- 24 PS §2-231 contains provisions for tax levy or debt for buildings or grounds pending a change in boundaries, etc.
- 24 PS §2-232 provides for the levy of a special tax if directed by court.
- 24 PS § 2-233 speaks to small district assistance after the combination of school districts.
- 24 PS §2-271 to 2-277 contains provisions for the amicable adjustment and apportionment of debt and property. Note: Section 271 speaks to the effective date of school district mergers.
- 24 PS§ 3-308 contains provisions for the election of directors of a merged district. In 1982 the Public-School Code was amended to provide that school directors are elected for 4-year terms.
- 24 PS § 5-524 speaks to the closing school or department; notice to, and suspending employees; other employment.
- 24 PS § 7-780 speaks to a public hearing prior to closing school.
- 24 P.S. 11-1124 references a merger is a permitted reason for a reduction of staff.
- 24 PS § 13-1311: Closing schools (b) department, and the average term attendance is twelve (12), or more, after such reopening, such school shall be considered re-established.
- 22 Pa. Code § 4.41(c): Scheduling [approval of the Department for changes] (c) A school district shall obtain approval of the Department prior to establishing a new school or changing school organization.
- 22 Pa. Code § 349.28: Closing of school buildings to K-12 educational use

### **Article XV-H - Administrative Partnerships Between School Entities**

- 24 P.S. § 15-1501-H – Legislative intent to help school entities save money and operate more efficiently by encouraging partnerships of routine administrative functions between school entities.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1502-H contains words and phrases when used in this article shall have the meanings given to them in this section unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1511-H indicates what can be shared with two or more school entities that enter into an agreement.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1521-H references the establishment of the administrative partnership grant pilot program.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1522-H identifies the minimum requirements for the grant application.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1523-H indicates number and amount of grant awards.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1524-H identifies funding source(s) for grants.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1525-H indicates the department shall provide technical assistance to school entities applying to share administrative functions
- 24 P.S. § 15-1526-H outlines reporting requirements by the school entities.
- 24 P.S. § 15-1527-H outlines reporting requirements by the department