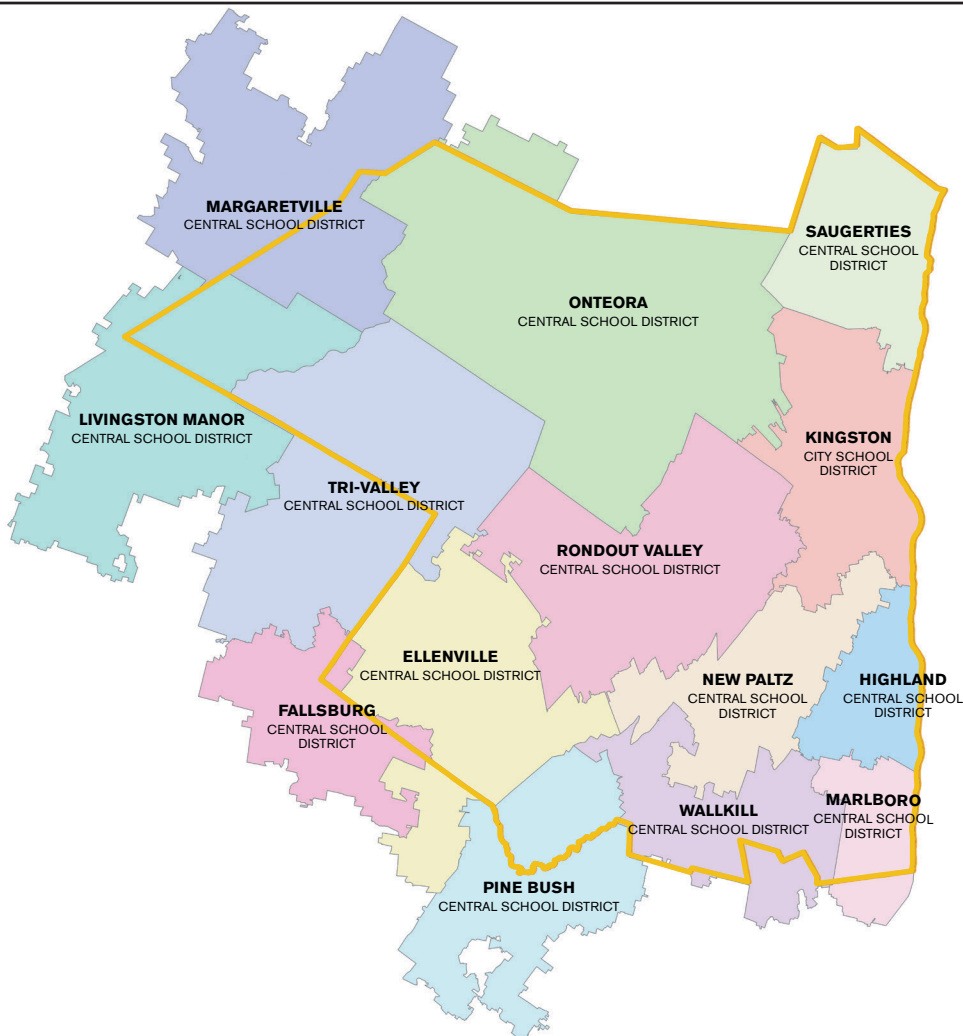


A 2020 VISION

FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION in ULSTER COUNTY

An Agenda for Change through Countywide Collaboration

August 2014



The Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, SUNY New Paltz
Ulster County School Boards Association

An Agenda for Change through Countywide Collaboration

For the foreseeable future, public education in New York faces a great array of interrelated challenges. School enrollments are declining across the State; the student population is becoming more and more diverse; standards and accountability have undergone significant change; State aid has been reduced and local tax levies restricted. With constraints on funding and additional mandates, school districts are increasingly hard pressed to provide the high quality educational programming that students deserve. And with fewer students to educate, school boards and administrators must consider the efficacy of existing staffing structures and school buildings that were designed to serve greater numbers of students.


In Ulster County, public school enrollment has decreased by 10 percent since 2008, the percent of socioeconomically disadvantaged students has increased from 28 to 41,ⁱ and the percent of minority students has risen from 22 to 27. Over the same time period, Ulster County school districts saw, collectively, a 9 percent decrease in the State contribution to public education, from \$178.6 million to \$162.5 million.^{ii, iii} Local funding is also constrained; the *Tax Levy Limit* and, more recently, the *Property Tax Freeze Credit*, place restrictions on the property tax levy for schools.

The impact of this has been felt throughout Ulster County. Also since 2008, five school

buildings have been closed. A total of 241 teaching positions have been lost. But clearly more will be needed. The persistent convergence of these challenges will continue to place considerable strain on public schools in Ulster County and across New York State, and to prompt conversations about effective and efficient delivery of educational services.

In November, 2013, the Legislative Action Committee of the Ulster County School Boards Association, in partnership with the Center for Research, Regional Education, and Outreach (CRREO), convened public education stakeholders at the *A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County* symposium to begin to conceptualize a countywide response to our current challenging circumstances. Broadly, the mission of *A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County* is to promote countywide, regional thinking, among the eight Ulster County school districts—Ellenville, Highland, Kingston, New Paltz, Onteora, Rondout Valley, Saugerties and Walkkill—in the service of improving administrative and programmatic educational delivery. The premise was that working together on a regional basis would allow school districts to capitalize on economies of scale and enhance educational opportunity—and thus respond to the new demographic, social, and fiscal environment—while preserving the local, community-based identity that is so important to the functioning of, and investment in, local schools.

Robin Jacobowitz, PhD, Trustee, Kingston City School District, Board of Education and Education Projects Director, CRREO; with
Phyllis McGill, PhD, Superintendent, Onteora Central School District;
Ruth Quinn, Vice President, New Paltz Central School District Board of Education; and
Jim Shaughnessy, Trustee, Kingston City School District Board of Education



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A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County

A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County provides a venue for conversation about joint efforts to promote the effective and efficient delivery of education in Ulster County through development of educational initiatives, formation of collaborative efforts to promote economic savings, and advocacy for legislative change.

Momentum for the work initiated at the November 2013 symposium has continued through two study groups charged with identifying potential areas of collaboration for Ulster County school districts. These study groups, staffed by subcommittees of *A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County* participants and supported by CRREO, met throughout the 2013-2014 school year and conducted research on a range of issues: regionalization of transportation, cooperative purchasing, regional pre-kindergarten, and equalizing educational opportunity through course-sharing, distance-learning, and sharing staff. The study groups also examined mechanisms, such as a countywide school calendar and common school bell schedules, which might facilitate service and programmatic sharing and also allow for the implementation of other advantageous educational measures, such as later school start times. Finally, the groups compiled a list of legislative and regulatory barriers that inhibit the ability of school districts to engage in collaborative efforts and

that may form a platform for legislative advocacy for Ulster County school districts.

Over the next few months, the study groups will issue short policy briefs about these issues in order to initiate discussion in school boards and other community venues about specific collaborative potentialities. *A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County* participants will then reconvene in December 2014 to discuss these policy briefs and then decide upon—and commit to—collaboration in several areas.

Current collaboration

In the process of deciding where to go, it is important to recognize the ways in which Ulster County school districts already work together. Some of these, given as examples, are further detailed below. This is not an exhaustive list—there are likely instances where school districts are sharing with each other or with municipalities—that are not captured here. Nevertheless, it is useful to document some of the ways that districts already work together, to be able to think about how to make these collaborations even more efficient and to identify other areas of service-sharing. Cooperation can be coordinated through Ulster BOCES, the Mid-Hudson Regional Information Center, local universities, other school districts and, in certain circumstances, with municipalities.

Administrative service sharing

- Cooperative purchasing in a range of areas from materials (calculators, art supplies, paper, food), to some maintenance services (snow plowing, landscaping), and operational support and management services, including technology services and support, data management, financial management, food services management, and security services, to name a few.
- Transportation for students with special needs. School districts in Ulster County join together—where feasible and cost-effective—to share bus routes for students with special needs who attend out-of-district schools.
- Cooperative purchase of natural gas and electricity through the Municipal Electric and Gas Alliance.


Educational program sharing

- Virtual Advanced Placement (VAP) courses through Ulster BOCES
- College courses offered through SUNY Ulster and SUNY New Paltz
- Professional development opportunities
- Library automation
- Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-Tech), Hudson Valley

Current climate

Certainly, collaboration as a mechanism for efficient and effective delivery of education is not a new idea. But in this new fiscal climate, there is a need to demonstrate additional savings—a lot of savings—derived from shared services, consolidations, or other efficiencies. In addition to the *Tax Levy Limit*, which school districts have lived under for the past few years, Governor Andrew Cuomo’s new *Property Tax Freeze Credit*, passed by the Legislature this past year, offers refunds of property tax increases to taxpayers if specified conditions are met. For school districts, in 2014-15, refunds will flow to taxpayers who reside within school districts that stayed within their tax levy limit. In 2015-16, refunds will be issued to taxpayers whose school districts adopt a Government Efficiency Plan that documents savings of at least 1 percent of the tax levy. In real dollars, this amounts to \$222,924 for the Ellenville Central School District, \$254,483 for the Highland Central School District, \$964,927 for the Kingston City School District, \$369,714 for the New Paltz Central School District, \$416,058 for the Onteora Central School District, \$343,799 for the Rondout Valley Central School District, \$358,022 for the Saugerties Central School District, and \$385,344 Wallkill School District.^{iv} The aggregate for all eight school districts for the year is \$3,315,271.

This fiscal reality, combined with school districts’ commitment and desire to provide high quality educational programming for their students, is requiring districts to search for ways to be even more efficient with tax dollars. Approaching service-sharing and coordination from a countywide perspective may provide a level of scale that would help school districts more easily meet the requirements of the *Tax Levy Limit* and the *Property Tax Freeze Credit*. This is recognized in recent guidance released by the New York State Department of Taxation about the *Property Tax Freeze Credit*, which states that school districts are “strongly encouraged” to develop Government Efficiency Plans that derive savings from “countywide or BOCES region-wide” collaborations.^v To economize even further, and to promote, and enhance, educational quality in our districts, we will need to work together in increasingly collaborative ways.



Rather than piecing our sharing together, service by service, Ulster County school districts should think collectively about ways to go down this road together.

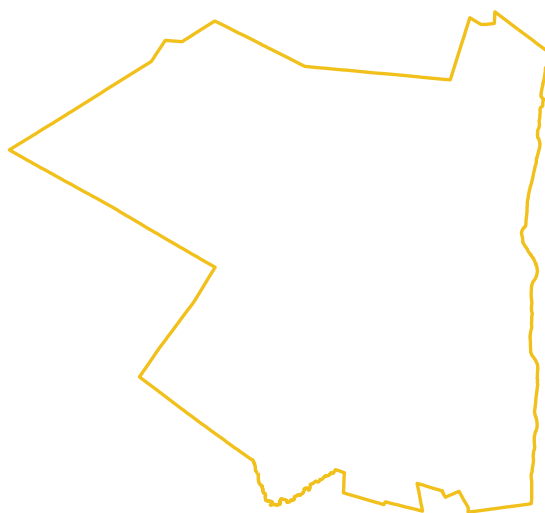


A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County provides a vehicle for engaging regional stakeholders in conversations about—and commitment to—the effective and efficient delivery of educational services within a countywide framework in Ulster County.

Thinking regionally

A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County is about approaching educational delivery from a regional frame, with the goal of enriching educational opportunity for our students and managing service delivery as efficiently as possible. Rather than piecing our sharing together, service by service, Ulster County school districts should think collectively about ways to go down this road together. In this way, we can maintain control over the character, shape, and extent of our collaborative efforts. For example, an external transportation consultant might recommend a complete transition to a regional model, with merged bus routes, shared warehousing and maintenance, and one centralized transportation director for the entire county. But we might decide to embark on this change in a different way, for example, merging bus routes only for certain purposes, establishing shared warehouses and maintenance in two or three locations around the county, and centralizing the transportation director role incrementally, as attrition occurs. Likewise, instead of eliminating a class because of low enrollment, perhaps the course offering could be opened to out-of-district enrollment, thereby maintaining (and in some instances, enhancing) educational opportunity for our students while also preserving teaching positions.

A transformation in thinking—to service delivery on a countywide, regional basis—permits new ways of functioning and working together that may yield long term benefits over time. *A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County* provides a vehicle for engaging regional stakeholders in conversations about—and commitment to—the effective and efficient delivery of educational services within a countywide framework in Ulster County. Approaching such sharing with a countywide lens permits a broadening of partnerships and economies of scale. And in the end, it may help preserve our schools during difficult financial times.



ⁱ In 2012-13, the New York State School report cards began reporting on the percentage of “economically disadvantaged” students in a district. This measure includes students whose families participate in a range of economic assistance programs, including free or reduced-price lunch programs, Food Stamps, Foster Care, Earned Income Tax Credit, Safety Net Assistance (SNA), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), to name a few (New York State Report Cards, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/>). Therefore, the 2012-13 percentage for socioeconomically disadvantaged students reported in this paper may be slightly inflated, as it is more inclusive than the measure (free and reduced price lunch eligibility) used in previous years. However, an analysis of 2011-12 data shows that 38 percent of students were eligible for free and reduced price lunch in that year. This adds confidence that the 2012-13 reported 40 percent is not grossly inflated.

ⁱⁱ This is compared to a 1.4 percent decrease—from \$21.1 billion to \$20.8 billion—Statewide.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data are from the New York State Report Cards, 2008-09 to 2013-14; and NYSUT (2014). Report: 69 percent of school districts have less state aid than five years ago. www.nysut.org/news/2014/january/report-69-percent-of-school-districts-have-less-state-aid-five-years-ago. Marlboro is included as an Ulster County school district in the NYSUT report, however, since it is not a component district of the Ulster BOCES, it is excluded from this analysis.

^{iv} Data are from Ulster BOCES. Dollar amounts may be higher if exclusions are not allowed. In that case, we will see Ellenville Central School District at \$225,966, Highland Central School District at \$254,483, Kingston City School District at \$971,804, New Paltz Central School District at \$380,000, Onteora Central School District at \$402,961, Rondout Valley Central School District at \$350,138, Saugerties Central School District at \$365,100, and Wallkill Central School District at \$391,252.

^v New York State Department of Taxation and Finance, Property Tax Freeze Credit Guidance, July 14, 2014, pp. 3. www.tax.ny.gov/pdf/publications/orpts/pub1030.pdf

Ulster County
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