

First and foremost, I want to thank the Appropriations Committee and the Education Committee for coming to Beaver County on your Pennsylvania Education Tour. I appreciate the opportunity to sit alongside my colleagues to share thoughts on how to address public school funding challenges.

As the retired superintendent of Central Valley SD, which is the first and only volunteer public school merger in PA, and as the former acting superintendent of the Wilkesburg City SD, which formed an educational partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools for secondary students (similar to Midland Tuition program here in Beaver County), and currently, as the Chief Recovery Officer in the Penn Hills SD – a moderate financially distressed district on the verge of exiting recovery status, I have firsthand experience sitting at the table during productive discussions regarding three scenarios: mergers, consolidations, and strategic planning for fiscally responsible turnarounds.

Today, I'm here to talk about alternative strategies to address two realities 1) the reality of students in small schools that do not have access to the same opportunities or resources of their neighboring districts, and 2) the taxpayers in those smaller communities that are paying a premium tax bill for less educational experiences in their schools. By the way, nearly 80% of these tax payers do not have children in schools. I believe they are voters who are open minded to exploring ways to reverse this trend.

First, let's start with mergers. Obviously, many school boards across the county and state are not as open-minded as the ones who led the merger discussions in Center and Monaca. Honestly, narrow mindsets are the underlying reason that mergers are so difficult to do, but there are other hurdles that come into play, such as equalization of taxes, labor contracts, demographics, facilities, and of course, matters of the heart. Here in Central Valley – far-sighted, responsible leadership at the board level simply opened the door to discussion and they only agreed to conduct a feasibility study. From there, information guided their decisions along the way, rather than assumptions and personal/political agendas. Mergers can be a viable option if communities are willing to at least explore it, and the state is willing to assist with the costs associated with mergers.

Next, consolidations at the secondary level have become more attractive for a number of reasons – Governance remains intact and elementary schools remain intact. Educational partnerships become a win/win/win proposition because districts save money, kids get more opportunity, and taxpayers get some relief. These have occurred quite a bit throughout the state already, not just here in Beaver County. Secondary educational partnerships can be a viable option, again, if communities are willing to at least explore it, and the state is willing to assist with the costs associated with consolidating high schools. In my professional opinion, this alternative seems to be most effective and most cost-efficient option to increase opportunities and resources for students in small school settings.

Third, financially distressed schools face challenges unique to their circumstances. For instance, consider charter school tuition reform – particularly regarding the special education tuition formula. Most, if not all, of our most financially strapped school districts have a high percentage of special education students. These same schools typically have high charter school enrollments as well. The current tuition formula for special education students restricts these districts from using their actual special education percentage in the tuition calculation. Adjusting the calculation formula to enable these districts to claim their actual special education population percentage rather than using the state average can lead to savings that reach into the millions across the state.

Another alternative strategy could be to reinstate the charter school reimbursement payment that was removed from the state subsidy a few years ago. Revisit the parameters of this revenue source and shape it to benefit the schools that need it the most.

And finally, in 1969, there were over 2500 school districts in PA. It was legislated to reduce that number to 501- now 500 with CV. They had to be K-12 systems; there was much consternation, but it was the right thing to do.

- a. Consider encouraging districts with less than 1000 students to merge.
- b. Consider encouraging high schools with less than 100 graduates to consolidate with an educational partner. I like this better.
- c. Fund teams to assist interested schools with feasibility studies that address 2-3 scenarios.

In closing, whether intentional or not, pitting private, charter, and traditional public school against each to compete for funding is insanity – there just isn't enough money for everyone. It seems to make better sense to investigate alternative strategies to redirect current funding in a fair way to reduce the fair funding price tag. I suspect that is why you organized this tour.

One final comment, I believe that the final decisions on these alternative strategies, such as mergers and/or consolidations, should be made locally, according to the will of the entire community. Maybe a little encouragement, incentive, and/or mandated legislation from the state may go a long way. Our children deserve more in these small communities, and taxpayers without school-age children deserve a break.