

NEWS

Center-Monaca merger puts education over rivalries

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MONACA — The school districts that serve Center Township and Monaca have been intertwined for generations by the steel industry that made them prosperous and football traditions they hold dear, but for decades they've drawn the line at merging.

Now, the territorial rivalries that kept the districts separate for so long have been trumped by declining enrollments and budget pressures that threaten academic quality.

In July, the Central Valley School District will become Pennsylvania's first merged district in at least 20 years.

"Our students were beginning to lose opportunities because we didn't have enough students to take classes at the middle school and high school level," said Daniel Matsook, superintendent of the Center Area School District.

Local officials hope their merger sets an example for other districts that may be contemplating consolidations. Gov. Ed Rendell is advocating that the state reduce its school district from 500 to 100 to cut costs and bolster education.

"There are a lot of commonalities that exist among the different school districts," said Michael Thomas, superintendent of the Monaca School District. "A lot of our practices are similar and they can see if any of that transfers to their particular situation."

From the start, the two tiny districts made bettering education the main goal of the merger and treated cost savings as a bonus.

The merger will cost \$2.7 million, with the state and federal governments covering about half.

Eventually, Central Valley expects to save more than \$1 million annually on everything from purchasing to teachers' salaries because some staffing will be streamlined, while offering

more advanced courses — such as calculus and chemistry — and moving its middle school into a building of its own. Athletic programs also are expected to become more competitive.

To ensure a smooth transition, the superintendents, board members and other school officials have worked together closely in the three years since the school boards approved the merger.

The two superintendents will remain in place during the first few months and one — though it is unclear who — will be phased out as the consolidation unfolds.

In the 2009-10 school year, only the elementary schools will consolidate. The next year, the high schools will follow suit. The school boards will merge in July, with 18 members from both districts and elections are expected to whittle the number of seats on the board to nine by 2011. The board will decide what to do with two Monaca school buildings that will remain empty. Last week, they voted to use the current Monaca high school as the new district's middle school.

“Ours is a pure merger,” Matsook said. “We’re creating a new district together. It can work, it can definitely work, but there’s certain circumstances that got to fall into place in order for it to work.”

Together, Monaca and Center have a population of fewer than 20,000 people.

In Monaca, 8 percent of families hover below the federal poverty line — for a family of four, that’s an income of \$22,050 a year — in contrast with only 3 percent in Center.

During the first year, Center is expected to see its property tax rate drop by about 3 mills — \$300 for every \$100,000 of property value — while Monaca will see its rate rise by about 2 mills. Homeowners and businesses will pay the same rate, which has yet to be determined.

The superintendents believe both towns will see taxes drop in the second year of the merger, once savings are realized.

Still, Rose Booher, 68, of Monaca, thinks the new district favors Center.

“I’m just glad my kids went here when they did. We’ll see what happens with the grandkids,” Booher said.

But Theresa Booher, Rose’s daughter-in-law, thinks the grandchildren — her daughters, aged 6 and 9 — will benefit. “It’ll give the kids more academic opportunities, I believe, for college,” she said.

Thomas and Matsook think the merger was inevitable.

Monaca's enrollment dropped from 1,517 students in 1971-72 to just 651 this school year; that was expected to drop further with high school enrollment plummeting from 242 this year to 168 within four years.

"Your programs would be viable, but how competitive they would be with that number of students is another question," Thomas said.

Center has seen its enrollment plummet from 3,242 in 1971-72 to 1,853 this year. Sometimes, Center had to cancel courses because there weren't enough students, Matsook said.

The new district will have more than 2,500 students. Class sizes — which currently average about 20 — will increase to 25. And Monaca students, who currently don't ride the bus, will face rides as long as 18 minutes.

Debbie Stacho, 58, lives in Center but works in a Monaca bridal shop. She supports the merger, but says it has created antagonism.

"Monaca has never really wanted the merger. They're just a very close-knit, family-oriented community," Stacho said, noting generations have attended the same schools. "I think they're going to miss that," she said.

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