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Central Valley offers blueprint for merger success

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Five years ago, history took place in Beaver County when the Center Area and Monaca school districts completed the first voluntary school merger in Pennsylvania history.

It took several years of negotiations and planning to pull it off, but it serves today as a perfect example of what can be accomplished if the adults are willing to push aside the secondary concerns -- traditions, athletics, school colors and mascots, etc. -- and focus on what's truly important ... the children.

As staff writer J.D. Prose outlined in his stories today, there is much to celebrate about this historic merger, both for the taxpayers of the combined district and the students enrolled there.

At the high school level, there are 37 courses and nine advanced-placement courses that were never offered at either school. Elementary pupils from Monaca were able to use a practically new building, Center Grange Primary School, rather than an aging building in need of renovation.

From a fiscal standpoint, the merger has brought a level of stability that taxpayers can appreciate. In the year prior to the merger, the combined budgets of Monaca and Center equaled \$30.1 million. A year later, the new Central Valley district had a budget of \$29.6 million. Five years later, the budget is \$32.5 million, even taking into consideration the ever-growing pension obligations for public school districts.

The tax rate for the current school year is 49.95 mills, which is still lower than the Center Area rate of 50.20 rate in 2008-09, and puts Central Valley at the lower end among county schools. Enrollment in the district has also remained fairly stable, hovering around 2,300-plus students.

When officials from both districts began discussing a merger around 2007, Monaca had no debt, but aging buildings and the prospect of looming pension obligations. Center Area had some \$30 million in debt, but newer buildings and a solid tax base.

Former Monaca Superintendent Mike Thomas told Prose, "As we began to delve into it and look deeper, it just made more and more sense."

So with all of the positive aspects of this voluntary merger out there, the one lingering question remains: Why don't other school districts take a serious look at a merger?

The answer may lie in one of those murky, non-measurable areas that often derail what seems like a common-sense action. "It's hard for people to change their mindsets," Central Valley High School Co-Principal Anthony Mendicino told Prose. "There are a lot of traditions that are set."

Given that, we hope officials in the Moon Area and Cornell school districts can get past the issue of traditions and nicknames as they embark on their discussions of a possible merger. We hope the path carved by Center Area and Monaca leads them to a similar destination, that of a merged district benefiting students and taxpayers alike.

Further, we hope that officials at the 14 school districts in Beaver County will consider merger partners in the not-too-distant future. This much is clear -- student enrollment continues to drop and there is no reason to believe that will change. The county had a peak public school enrollment of 48,536 in 1971-72; last year, enrollment was 22,196.

Central Valley School Board President Joe O'Neill may have said it best: "Look at all these districts; from my point of view, it's just stupid."