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Central Valley's emergence from Center/Monaca school district merger a rousing success

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Sept. 21--It might be just a few years since the Center Area and Monaca school districts merged, but to Central Valley School District Superintendent Nick Perry it feels much longer.

"My perspective is that five years has been 50 years. It seems like we've been Central Valley forever," Perry said. "I don't think it could've gone any better than it did."

In 2009, history was made when Central Valley's first school year began with merged elementary grades (kindergarten through fifth). The merger was completed a year later when grades 6 through 12 were combined for 2010-11.

While there have been rumors and discussions about various district mergers across the state in recent years, including current talks between Moon Area and Cornell, Central Valley was the state's first voluntary merger.

Looking back on the five-year anniversary, those who were involved in the effort agreed that the years of work and political wrangling were well worth the result.

"Absolutely," said Mike Thomas, the former Monaca superintendent who has no second thoughts.

"The merger between Monaca and Center benefited both," Thomas said. "It was a natural fit between the two districts."

'IT JUST MADE ... SENSE'

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A casual conversation between Thomas and then-Center Area Superintendent Dan Matsook a few years before was the start of it all, Thomas recalled. "That got the ball rolling. There was interest on both sides to at least explore the prospects of a merger," he said. "As we began to delve into it and look deeper, it just made more and more sense."

Monaca had little debt, but aging buildings, while Center Area had about \$30 million in debt and newer buildings, including the Center Grange Primary School that opened in 2007.

What plagued both districts, though, was falling enrollment, the same ailment that other Beaver County school districts have faced for years. Monaca had 710 students in 2007-08 and that dropped to 640 by 2008-09.

Center was at 1,781 students in 2008-09, but just five years before the district was at 2,001. Central Valley School Board President Joe O'Neill, who was a teacher in Center Area for 37 years and coached football in both districts, said he saw fewer boys coming out for Monaca football and teachers struggling to fill advanced classes to justify the expense.

Consequently, O'Neill said, students who were willing and able to take those courses were shortchanged. "When you get that small, it's hard to offer specialized courses," he said.

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Although Center Area was larger, it was not immune to enrollment troubles. It, too, had problems filling some advanced high school classes as enrollment declined, O'Neill recalled.

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Officials said the merger stanching enrollment declines, allowing Central Valley to offer courses that separate districts never could. In the high school, Perry said there are 37 courses and nine advanced-placement courses that were never offered at either Center Area or Monaca.

There are 129 total course offerings, 13 advanced-placement classes, 46 online courses and dual enrollment at Penn State-Beaver and the Community College of Beaver County.

At the middle school, pre-algebra and algebra are now offered, as well as more options in foreign languages and practical arts, such as music, art, family and consumer sciences, industrial arts and library.

"I still believe this was the best decision for the students," Thomas said.

In 2009-10, Central Valley had 2,333 students. Enrollment has fluctuated over the years, but it has pretty much remained steady with the district reporting 2,382 students in 2013-14.

O'Neill said the officials who pursued the merger should be credited with being proactive. "Things, I think, are better and more stable today thanks to their foresight," he said.

BY THE NUMBERS

With school districts being buffeted by pension payments, static state funding, contractual demands and annual inflation, it's not unheard of for budgets to increase by \$1 million or more in a year.

In the years leading up to the merger, Center Area and Monaca budgets combined equaled \$26 million (2004-05), \$26.8 million (2005-06), \$28.8 million (2006-07), \$29.7 million (2007-08) and \$30.1 million (2008-09).

The first year of the merger, though, saw the Central Valley budget dip to \$29.6 million. It took until 2012-13, when the budget reached \$30.3 million, for spending to reach the level it was at before the merger.

This year, Central Valley's estimated expenditures are \$32.5 million with salaries accounting for \$14.6 million and pension contributions totaling \$3.1 million.

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Perry said one of the main reasons Central Valley was able to keep its budget in check following the merger was because of a buyout offered to teachers over a two-year period.

Simply put, the district lost experienced-but-expensive teachers, who were replaced by less-experienced, but more affordable, ones.

Moon-Cornell merger talks begin in earnest

The superintendents of Cornell and Moon Area school districts last week had their first "date," so to speak, to discuss the potential merger of the districts.

Financially, the merger "has been pretty successful," Perry said, adding that savings also were seen in cutting duplication of services. A point of pride among officials is that nobody lost a job in the merger, but reductions were made via the buyout and attrition.

Besides noting escalating pension payments, Thomas pointed to Monaca's aging buildings that needed updating, such as C.J. Mangin Elementary. "Those were expenses that weren't incurred" because of the merger, he said.

When it came to taxes, one of the keys to making the merger happen, according to Matsook, was that the millage rates for Center Area and Monaca were relatively close. In 2008-09, Center Area's rate was 50.20 mills while Monaca's was 45 mills.

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Taxes were set at 46.8 mills for 2009-10, giving Center Area residents in Center and Potter townships a cut, while Monaca residents saw an increase. Mel Mikulich, Monaca's board president during the merger and the first president of the combined school board, said some borough residents opposed a merger based on the hike.

Proponents countered that Monaca was going to have to raise taxes regardless, mostly because of pension obligations. "That was going to hit us," Mikulich said.

Another obvious response was that even though Monaca residents would be paying higher taxes, their students would be reaping the benefits of a merged district, such as the expanded

course offerings.

Since that first year, taxes have crept up from 47.64 mills for 2010-11 and 2011-12, to 48.68 mills for 2012-13 and 2013-14 when Central Valley's rate ranked 11th among the county's 14 districts. Millage is at 49.95 mills for this school year.

'NO BLUEPRINT'

The road to the merger was long and, at times, rocky. A political change on the Center Area board brought some uncertainty and frustration, but reasonable heads prevailed and the process stayed on track.

Perry and Matsook said the strategic plan -- backed by two studies -- that included transparency and free-flowing communication was the vital part in preparing for the merger. "The plan of the merger was not done willy-nilly," Perry said.

A 36-member steering committee with nine subcommittees studied all the various aspects to a merger, ranging from curriculum to collective bargaining to mascots and colors. Mikulich only half-jokingly estimated he spent as many as 500 hours in meetings between the initial talks over dinner to the last meeting finalizing the merger.

"There was a lot of communication to everyone involved," said Anthony Mendicino, who is high school co-principal along with Shawn McCreary.

Although some parents argued against a merger because of the impact on students, those problems never emerged. "The kids are the least of your problems," O'Neill said. "They'll melt together as one."

Instead of focusing on educational issues, most of the opposition was based on the emotional ties to each district, especially the fiercely proud Monaca residents who cherished their school and traditions.

Mikulich said that football games in the stadium by the Ohio River "had its own little charms, but that's not the purpose of a school district."

As for bringing the students together under the Central Valley banner, McCreary said it was good that the lower grades were merged because it allowed administrators to learn from a few

mistakes and prepare better for the upper-level merger a year later.

"There was definitely no blueprint to follow," Mendicino said.

The success of the 2010 Central Valley Warriors football team (see related story), which won the WPIAL Class AAA title, went a long way to bonding the two towns and soothing lingering resentment.

"You know what? When you win, everything goes smoothly," O'Neill said.

"It brought the communities together because your kid was playing next to my kid who probably six months ago didn't know each other," Mikulich said, "and, 'Oh, wow. This isn't so bad.'"

STILL THE FIRST

Among the officials involved in the creation of Central Valley, there remains a nagging question about the lack of attempts to mimic their success.

Several of the officials interviewed said their colleagues have asked them about mergers over the years, but so far at least none has accomplished it.

"It's hard for people to change their mindsets," Mendicino said. "There are a lot of traditions that are set."

O'Neill said most districts inevitably will face fiscal dilemmas where they will have to either slash spending -- and hurt education -- or increase taxes and squeeze district residents.

"Look at all these districts," O'Neill said, "from my point of view it's just stupid."

Thomas said he is disappointed that more districts have not considered following in Central Valley's footsteps, but he was glad to see that Moon Area and Cornell are starting to talk about a potential merger.

"It doesn't hurt to look," Thomas said.

Matsook said he tells district officials that quiz him to just take a look and consider all the factors, from educational benefits to millage rates. Most importantly, however, is to be "open-minded" and leave behind any preconceived notions.

Those who saw the merger to completion can be proud of their achievement, Mikulich said, and not just because it was the first of its kind.

"It's worked out very, very well," he said. "We have a very, very good school district that will be around a very long time."

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