

EDUCATION | TUCKAHOE

# Call to Merge Small Districts Sets Off Officials' Protests



Susan Farley for The New York Times

**POSITIVES** Mark Dineen teaches an earth science class at Tuckahoe Middle School. Tuckahoe's average class size is 20.

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## TUCKAHOE



**NO SAVINGS** Michael V. Yazurlo, Tuckahoe schools superintendent, calls potential savings “minuscule to the individual household.”

**WHEN** Michael V. Yazurlo does the calculus, he figures abolishing his school district in a consolidation is not worth it.

A state commission recently urged small school districts like Tuckahoe to merge with other small districts or let themselves be swallowed up by larger ones. Why pay for two superintendents when you can have one? the commission suggested. Why two business officers or other duplicate administrators?

But when Dr. Yazurlo — who concedes consolidation might cost him his job as Tuckahoe schools superintendent — does the math, he figures a merger with, say, nearby Eastchester would eliminate at most four positions and save each homeowner in Tuckahoe perhaps \$150 a year in property taxes. (The average school portion of the tax bill is \$11,800, Tuckahoe school officials say.) There would be no savings in shuttered buildings because the Eastchester and Tuckahoe schools are filled to capacity.

“I’ve done some random numbers, and I don’t think it’s going to matter,” Dr. Yazurlo said of the effects of consolidation. “It’s minuscule to the individual household.”

But merging districts could have some real costs, both calculable and intangible, he argued. Consolidation, for example, could end up increasing enrollment in some classes, expanding class size and in some cases requiring the hiring of new teachers, he said.

“Now some savings you’ve realized by cutting administrators comes right back in,” Dr. Yazurlo said. “No matter how well you plan it, there are those little demons hiding in the details, and you don’t know about it until you get to that point and you say, ‘Gee, we never thought about this!’ ”

Most important, he said, Tuckahoe could lose its intimacy and no longer be a place where administrators monitor each child's progress and a parent can complain directly to him.

The state commission, headed by [Thomas R. Suozzi](#), the Nassau County executive, issued a report Dec. 1 that called for consolidating school districts with fewer than 1,000 students as a remedy for easing what Mr. Suozzi called "the crushing school property tax burden our state faces."

Roughly 215 districts in the state are small enough to meet that threshold, including Tuckahoe, Elmsford and Pocantico Hills in Westchester. The commission also called for capping annual growth in property taxes at 4 percent. The commission justified its proposals by noting that New Yorkers spend more per student than any other state — \$18,768 — and pay the nation's highest local property taxes.

In urging consolidations, the commission left ambiguous the question of whether smaller districts should merge with large ones or only other small districts. It said consolidation would permit economies of scale and expand the availability of Advanced Placement and other electives that tiny districts do not have enrollments large enough to offer.

Educators pointed out that the State Legislature has regularly refused to grapple with consolidation, aware that it was, as one Long Island superintendent put it, "a political time bomb."

"If they were to approve it, some people's taxes would go up and some would go down, and the legislators will have their ears filled with the cries of people whose taxes went up," said Thomas R. Quinn, the superintendent of Springs in the Hamptons on Long Island.

Mr. Suozzi acknowledged in an interview that there might be isolated instances where demographic, geographic and fiscal factors would require exceptions. But even where superintendents essentially remained as principals, he said, consolidation would allow districts to

cut costs of purchasing, payroll, maintenance and other back-office functions.

Nevertheless, [Diane Ravitch](#), a historian of education in New York City, said that “back-office operations could be consolidated without necessarily consolidating the district.”

Westchester has had no consolidation in at least two decades.

Educators in two of the three Westchester districts with fewer than 1,000 students said Mr. Suozzi and his staff did not visit them. If they had, the educators said, the commission would have become aware of factors that make consolidation more complicated than it appears in the abstract.

Some educators expressed surprise that such a proposal was being put forward in an era when schools try to limit class sizes and superintendents break up large high schools into more manageable theme schools.

“The irony of this is that what’s working best is what they’re trying to disband,” said Bart Linehan, the principal of the 270-student Tuckahoe High School.

If Tuckahoe, an independent district since the late 19th century, is pressed to merge, it will not find a willing partner in neighboring Eastchester, which at 3,087 students is three times Tuckahoe’s size. Mary Ellen Meehan Byrne, a spokeswoman for Eastchester, underscored Eastchester’s overcrowding but also argued for something more amorphous — the benefits of loyalty to a hometown school.

“I don’t know anyone who would like the idea of losing that relationship with their neighborhood school,” she said.

There are already examples of cooperation between the districts, Dr. Yazurlo said. In the past, Tuckahoe has sent high school students to

Eastchester to take courses it does not offer. And the two districts have made consolidations on bus transportation and summer school.

One Tuckahoe official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the topic's sensitivity, predicted that any effort to merge would spark a strong outcry in Eastchester because Tuckahoe's schools have a more diverse population — roughly a quarter of the students are African-American or Hispanic — while Eastchester is overwhelmingly white. In the 2006-7 school year, 5 percent of the students at Eastchester Senior High School were African-American or Hispanic, according to state data.

Barbara Peters, superintendent of Elmsford, which has roughly 1,000 students, wondered if consolidation might produce some paradoxical consequences — like increasing pay for Elmsford teachers because of a merger with a district with higher salaries.

Dr. Peters recalled that in her previous assignment, running the West Seneca schools near Buffalo, the familiarity bred in a more intimate setting proved essential in raising achievement markedly at one of the low-performing schools. The atmosphere helped unite teachers, parents and students in the effort, she said.

“When you have that sense of family and tight-knit community, that sometimes has significant benefits that you lose when you move to a larger setting,” she said. “There’s the possibility of a loss of ownership, a loss of identity, and a larger school could potentially lower staff motivations and productivity, parent involvement and student motivation.”

At Tuckahoe High School, Dr. Linehan suggested, some of the savings proposed through consolidation might be illusory. His school does not have an assistant principal, department head or curriculum coordinator, he said. Under a merger, he might need to remain as either a principal or assistant principal to supervise the Tuckahoe building, eliminating that savings. “I do cafeteria and hall duty, I greet the kids,” he said.

He conceded that because his district is small, it lacks enough students to offer an array of [A.P. classes](#). It offers 8, while bigger schools offer 12 or more. But Tuckahoe keeps its average class size at 20. Teachers help do work like curriculum design and testing in ways they may shrug off in a larger school, he said. The chemistry teacher teaches a forensics elective, the physics teacher A.P. environmental science.

With only 60 or so graduates a year, Dr. Linehan said, Tuckahoe High can track each senior and determine how to assist students in danger of not graduating. Only one student did not graduate last year, a year when the valedictorian went to [Harvard](#). Consolidation, he said, might make sense with factories, “but when dealing with kids, it’s much more involved and intricate.”

Students seem to like Tuckahoe’s independent small size. “You know everyone and everyone’s really close,” said Denise, 14, a ninth grader. “You get more comfortable because everybody’s friendly with each other.” The school allowed students to identify themselves only by first name to protect their privacy.

Dr. Yazurlo expressed anger that schools were being asked to make such sacrifices at a time when millions of public dollars are being spent on things like sports stadiums and racetracks.

“Maybe if they looked at those things a little closer, they wouldn’t have to look at a questionable thing like a merger of schools, which has dubious savings,” he said.