

# School boards group questions savings from consolidation

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PRINCETON BOROUGH -- School district consolidation is not the cure-all for high property taxes that some claim, said Frank Belluscio, director of communications for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said Friday.

The association hosted a conference Friday called "The E in Thorough and Efficient: How we can insure Efficiency in Spending School Tax Dollars" in conjunction with the Policy Research Institute for the Region at Princeton University.

The association urges districts to consider consolidation when it would improve education or save money, but experience shows that has not always been the case, Belluscio said.

Current labor law requires the consolidated district to adopt the contract of whichever district was highest paid, and then the costs are apportioned among the various municipalities, he said.

"What we've found invariably is that somebody's property taxes do go up," he said. "That is because of differences in property wealth, and there might be differences in enrollment."

Currently, the state Education Department has ordered the 21 executive county superintendents to submit proposals by March 2010 to regionalize all the school districts in their jurisdictions, Belluscio said.

However, the focus is on consolidating the elementary-only districts and high school-only districts so the state will have all kindergarten through 12th-grade districts, Belluscio said. Mercer County already has all kindergarten through 12th grade districts, but Burlington County still has four K- through sixth-grade districts -- Chesterfield, Mansfield, North Hanover and Springfield -- which feed into the Northern Burlington Regional District for the upper grades.

The school boards association has issued a policy statement on regionalization urging that the changes only take place when it has been approved by voter referendum, if a thorough study indicates educational and financial benefits, and as long as the tax reapportionment is phased in over ten years.

Friday's conference at Princeton University included a discussion on consolidation with panelists Ernest Reock, professor emeritus from Rutgers University, Assemblyman Joseph Cryan, chairman of the education committee, Michael Ritacco, superintendent of the Toms River School District and Gerald Vernotica, assistant commissioner for field services at the state Education Department.

Another issue that challenges local school boards is the changes in the state aid formulas that flow every few years from changes in political leadership, said Vincent E. Giordano, executive director of the New Jersey Education Association.

As political leadership changes and a new philosophy or formula is touted as the magic bullet, schools never get the benefit of continuity of funding, he said.

"Nobody knows what page they're supposed to be on," he said.

One local school board member in attendance praised the gathering highly.

Joshua Leinsdorf, chairman of the finance committee of the Princeton Regional Board of Education, said the conference gave him a valuable overview of school funding from the perspectives of legislators, state education officials and professors who study education policy.

"It was brilliant, absolutely brilliant, Leinsdorf said, adding he believes Princeton is doing an efficient job, but could save money by transporting students by New Jersey Transit, rather than running its own separate buses.