

August 13th Joint Meeting between Wynantskill UFSD and Troy CSD Transcript

Troy CSD Board President Ebony Pompey-Conway Introduction

- Good evening. I want to extend a warm welcome to the Board members and administration from Wynantskill Union Free School District.
- As you know, our communities are more than neighbors, we are long-time partners, and we look forward to our students participating in merged sports for the first time this fall.
- We appreciate you joining us for this important conversation about the future of public education in our communities.

Wynantskill UFSD Board President Nichole Hurbanek Remarks

- Thank you to the Troy City School District Board for hosting us tonight. As the Wynantskill Union Free School District Board President I can attest that this meeting is the culmination of a significant and introspective journey for our district.
- Over the past months, we have engaged deeply with our community – students, staff, families, and residents – through our Optimization Study. This included in-person forums, individual and small group interviews, remote meetings, and surveys.
- In addition to qualitative stakeholder feedback, a comprehensive review and analysis of quantitative data was conducted. This included state aid runs, enrollment trends, student achievement data, and a wide range of financial metrics, such as tax rates, tax levy history, expenditure patterns, and reserve levels.
- What emerged was a powerful affirmation of our close-knit community and the high-quality, personalized education we provide. However, the study also unequivocally highlighted the significant fiscal pressures and the limitations we face in expanding academic and extracurricular offerings due to our size.
- Our community expressed a clear desire for expanded opportunities for our students, particularly at the middle school level, and for long-term financial stability.
- The Optimization Study identified a potential merger with a suitable educational partner, specifically mentioning Troy City School District. Our consultants also recommended that the district pursue a Reorganization Feasibility Study with the Troy City School District, pending mutual agreement from both school boards.
- The purpose of tonight's meeting is to have a conversation to gauge interest in a joint Feasibility Study. If initiated, this Feasibility Study would conduct a thorough analysis of both districts' projected enrollments and staffing, program offerings, curriculum, transportation, and the potential fiscal impacts of reorganization, including state aid, expenditures, and local tax implications.

Questar III District Superintendent Gladys Cruz Remarks

- Thank you for coming together this evening for this important discussion. As your BOCES District Superintendent, I help local superintendents and school boards facilitate discussions about a wide variety of topics impacting their communities.
- My role, and the role of the BOCES, is to serve as a neutral resource, providing information, resources and assistance as you consider all angles of this complex and significant topic.
- Prior to tonight's meeting, we convened a meeting of Superintendents Carmello and Yodis, leaders at the BOCES, and representatives from the New York State Education Department, including David Elliott, who is the coordinator of educational aid services. David, thank you for your guidance and serving as a resource – and for joining us tonight.
- Ultimately, the school boards must decide whether to pursue a joint feasibility study is the appropriate step for both of your communities. We, at the BOCES, are here to support you and assist you with making an informed decision.

David Elliot PowerPoint Presentation

- Thank you to both boards of education, thank you to Dr. Cruz, and thank you to both Supt. Carmello and Supt. Yodis for inviting me this evening. And a special thank you to Troy City SD for hosting us this evening.
- School district reorganization is not the easiest topic to discuss. There are currently about 700 active and operating school districts in New York State, and each and every one of them represents a community bond that's been seen as a fixed constant for generations. But school districts in NY State hold a unique position in the organization of State governments.
- School districts, which have largely remained structurally unchanged for multiple generations, have evolved to become the beating heart of small cities, towns, and villages—organized and controlled locally, based on a set of mutually agreed-upon borders and boundaries, and strong commitment and dedication to serving the continuously evolving needs of the children and families that reside within them.
- In 1845, it was estimated there were about 11,000 separate independent school districts in NYS. By 1956, after passing several laws incentivizing consolidation and reorganization, that number shrank to 1,465.
- Population numbers drive the ability to effectively operate a school district. More residents means more students and a greater tax base to support the expenses to operate a school district.
- But businesses and local industries change over time, which has a direct impact on population. Population changes, coupled with increasing operational costs overall, presents a challenge to residents (financially, socially, emotionally) to provide school-age children residing within the district with the

best possible educational programming and services.

- Sharing services and expenses with neighbors is one way to optimize a school district, and the Troy and Wynantskill school districts do collaborate already, both directly and through BOCES. But sometimes a formal restructuring/reorganization can provide a significant benefit to school districts that cannot be realized through other means.
- Reorganized districts can achieve greater economies of scale, can cost less to operate than two or more districts individually, and with the assistance of financial incentives provided by State Law, can allow a new or newly enlarged district to provide more for its students and its broader community than it ever could previously.
- The Education Department has one priority—to ensure that all school-age children in NY have the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed into adulthood. How education is delivered is the responsibility of the school districts, and ultimately the residents who live in, work in, and support that mission locally.
- The decision to reorganize a school district is not an easy one; and it should be considered carefully and deliberately. The Commissioner of Education will not Order a reorganization or consolidation without evidence that the residents of those districts affected actively support reorganization.
- The Troy and Wynantskill school boards appear poised to authorize a formal reorganization feasibility study. Over the next several months, the two districts will meet with consultants who will look at all aspects of the current districts and explore options for a merged district.
- Once that report is complete, both districts will informally assess public support for reorganization. If it appears favorable, residents of Wynantskill UFSD will have the opportunity to vote on whether the district should be annexed by Troy City SD. If the vote result is favorable and the Troy board of education resolves to accept that proposal, the Commissioner will order the consolidation of the two school districts. The State Education Department, Dr. Cruz, and Questar BOCES will serve as a neutral and independent source of information and will support the needs of both school districts throughout this process.

Troy CSD Superintendent John Carmello Remarks

- An exciting time for both districts – for both communities. Truly a win-win.
- GD will stay open. The building will not close – the staff will stay intact – and the facility will, not only stay open, it will get way better.
- We wholeheartedly welcome this Feasibility study and look forward to what might come of it for our two school districts.
- We have had a longstanding positive relationship/partnership with the Wynantskill School District going back to when I was Troy High principal and even well before that.
- This coming school year we have agreed to merge modified sports—all Gardner Dickinson students who want to participate in sports this year at the modified level, will compete for Troy Middle School.
- GD students are also going to have the opportunity to participate in ski club and the middle school musical this school year – we are excited about sharing these opportunities with the Gardner Dickinson students.
- I have reviewed at length the report from the Optimization study that was conducted.
- It is clear from that report and the extensive work that was completed, that all stakeholder groups in Wynantskill want the same thing:
- The school and building to stay intact
- Expanded opportunities for the students, academically, athletically, and with extracurricular activities.
- I am confident this Feasibility study will show, without question, that a “complete partnership” of the two districts is how we get this done.
- I’ve already mentioned the current partnership that the two districts have. As one of the high school choices for GD students, those GD students who attend Troy High School thrive and excel.
- In the last 14 years, we have had 2 valedictorians, 4 salutatorians, and 6 students who ranked number three from former GD students.
- During that same 14 years, GD students who have attended Troy High have earned over 3,000 college credits through our extensive college in the high school program, averaging over 220 college credits per year – that is just for GD students.
- We have as good of a college credit-bearing program as anyone in the area with 24 courses that can lead to college credit and two more on the way next year. Last year’s graduates alone earned over 2000 college credits while at Troy High.

- Last year's graduating class also earned over \$300,000 in scholarships and awards that we give out at our annual awards night and although I don't have that breakdown, GD students certainly have been beneficiaries of this scholarship money over the years as well.
- The most compelling argument for this "partnership" going forward. The financial incentive aid from NYS. If we combine the two districts together, we stand to receive over \$241 million over the next 15 years.
- That is Game Changing money. That money will allow us to do so many outstanding things for the students and the communities of both districts. Specifically, for GD, that amount of money will guarantee, as I stated earlier, that we keep the building open.
- The plan is to not only keep it open, but keep the faculty and staff and principal here – to keep things pretty much as is.
- That is money that we will use to expand and improve upon the already comprehensive academic, social emotional, and athletic programs we have from pre-k to grade 12.
- It is money we will use to expand our after-school offerings, especially at the elementary levels, where we currently have a program in all 5 of our elementary schools Monday through Friday
- In addition to our academic after school programs, we offer Flag Football, Basketball, Lacrosse, Field Hockey, and Karate.
- GD will be able to have a similar schedule with these kinds of after school programs at their school.
- And it is money that we will use to maintain the already low class sizes that we enjoy in the Troy School District.
- In addition to that \$241 million, there is an additional financial incentive.
- If this merger/annexation goes through, our building aid ratio increases to 98%.
- Our current building aid ratio in Troy is around 90%. That means for every dollar we spend on Capital Project work, we get about 90 cents of that back from the State.
- That is why we have been able to do so many projects.
- We completely renovated our middle school, as well as School 16 and School 18, and are currently in the process of a project that will bring a brand new, state of the art Technology Wing to Troy High School to be completed in the Fall of 2027.
- We are able to do all of these projects without any impact to the taxpayers because of the building aid ratio.

- With that ratio going to 98%, that now becomes even better. If this happens, then for every dollar we spend, including on the GD building, we will get 98 cents back in state aid.
- So not only will we be able to keep the GD building open, we can do a Capital Project there and make it a State of the Art, 21st century building with everything the staff and students need for an optimal learning environment and a safe and secure facility.... With no impact on taxpayers.
- Again, if the Gardner Dickinson community wants the school to stay open and to stay intact, and get even better, this is how that happens – through the Troy-Wynantskill partnership.
- Thank you all for being here this evening. I look forward to all the Town Halls and the committee and stakeholder meetings that will be scheduled and answering your questions and addressing any concerns at that time.
- As I said earlier, this partnership is a game Changer for the Troy and Wynantskill school districts and we certainly welcome this feasibility study and the process that will follow.

Wynantskill UFSD Superintendent Mary Yodis Remarks

- I want to take a moment to sincerely thank everyone who joined us tonight and contributed to this important discussion.
- First, my deep appreciation to the Troy City School District Board of Education for hosting us and for being so immediately welcoming to our district with such an open mind toward future partnerships.
- Superintendent John Carmello, thank you for your continued partnership and commitment to our students. Over the past decade, I have had the pleasure of working with you, and you have provided countless opportunities and unwavering support to our school community.
- I would also like to thank New York State Education Department's David Elliott for lending his expertise and perspective to us this evening. David, the many questions you have answered for me personally over the past several weeks and days are truly commendable. Thank you.
- Dr. Gladys Cruz, District Superintendent, and Harry Hadjoannou, Deputy Superintendent of Questar III BOCES—thank you for the steady guidance you have provided Wynantskill over many years, and for the support we know you will continue to offer us as we navigate this important and challenging process.

- I would like to express my gratitude to The Schmitt Group, Brian Schmitt, and Bob Breidenstein, who led our Optimization Study over the past nine months with such dedication and care. Bob, in particular, spent countless hours/days on-site, taking a deep and thoughtful look at the many complexities of our district. He devoted much of his time to speaking with all stakeholder groups, helping us understand that now is indeed the right time to consider change. Thank you, and thank you for answering the phone morning, noon and night when I have a thought or a question for you.
- The Schmitt Group's work reinforced a truth we already knew—our community deeply loves our school district and wants to see it remain open. But we all also recognize that, to do so, we need additional support. We believe that programmatic and financial support from the Troy City School District, coupled with \$241 million from NY State, will ensure that Gardner-Dickinson remains open for many years to come, with the dedicated teachers and staff who have made this district a success continuing their work in our Gardner-Dickinson school building.
- Most importantly, I want to thank our students, families, faculty, staff, and residents who have engaged so thoughtfully in these conversations. Your feedback has shaped every step of this journey.
- Tonight's conversation is not an ending—it is a beginning. Once we officially onboard a consultant group to conduct the Reorganization Feasibility Study (which we hope to do by the end of September), there will be many opportunities for the entire community to participate—whether by joining committees, attending forums, or sharing your thoughts and questions in community discussions.
- We have recorded all comments and questions from tonight's meeting, as we will for each future meeting, and will be creating a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document as soon as possible to clarify and answer everything we can at this stage. This will be shared with the community so that everyone has access to the same information. There will also be a shared website, hosted by Questar III BOCES, where all updates and resources will be posted: <https://www.questar.org/feasibility/>.
- Already scheduled are several community conversations to be held on September 8th and 9th. For those of you here tonight, we've prepared a handout listing the dates and times of these upcoming sessions with me and Bob Breidenstein, the consultant who conducted our six-month optimization study. If you haven't already, please take one before you leave.
- I encourage you to attend a meeting to learn more about the study process, its findings, and the data that supports the recommendation to move forward with a reorganization feasibility study with the Troy City School District. These sessions will be both informative and interactive, giving community members the opportunity to

ask questions and share their perspectives. We will answer as many questions we can at this point.

- Two of these meetings will be held at The American Legion Hall—one at 8:15 a.m. and another at 6:45 p.m. In addition, there will be two shorter informational sessions incorporated into our school open houses for parents and guardians who are already attending those events.
- All of this information will be available on the newly created Questar III BOCES Feasibility Study webpage at www.questar.org/feasibility/ and shared on our social media pages. Please visit the site regularly for updates and to review the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document, which will continue to be updated throughout this process.
- The future of our school belongs to all of us, and together, we will explore every possibility to ensure our students have the best opportunities for success.
- Thank you again for being here tonight and for caring so deeply about the future of our children.