

## **Berkshire County Education Task Force**

### **White Paper**

*Approved by unanimous vote August 29, 2015*

#### **Problem statement:**

In Berkshire County, public school districts are faced with:

- A general overall decline in student enrollment,
- Rising operational costs (ie. benefits, special education, technology),
- Declining/flat revenues leading to additional financial burden to towns and municipalities,
- Reductions in the diversity and range of educational programs available to students in response to rising costs that are outpacing state aid and local contributions.

**The Berkshire County Education Task Force has been formed to advance solutions that we recommend be enacted across the county.**

#### **Data Highlights:**

With the support of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (privately sponsored), the Central Berkshire Regional School District subcommittee assembled a comprehensive (first stage) data set that includes enrollment, financial, choice, and personnel markers. This data includes historical, current and projected trends. Key findings include:

- Public schools in Berkshire County have experienced a 22.1% decline (4,522) students since 2000. It is anticipated that this trend will continue over the next ten years with an additional 11% (1,789) student enrollment decline.
- School enrollment has been impacted by the significant decrease in young adults – the demographic that have children
- Berkshire County has 19 school districts organized into a combination of 13 independent, charter and school unions, with a total enrollment of 15,904 in 2015.
- Over the past two years state funding (Chapter 70) has increased, on average, .5% (FY 2015) and 1.3% (FY 14) county-wide. At the same time, budgets have increased by 1.6% (FY 15) and 2.6% (FY 14), resulting in a need for increasing local contributions towards school budgets.
- Benefits (pension and insurance) are inflating at annual rates that significantly outpace the growth of district budgets (several districts report estimated 8% annual increases in health costs while total budgets are rising at 3% or less). The net result is a reduction in total personnel, and corresponding elimination of programs.
- The diversity of county students (special education, English language learners, alternative education) and state regulatory requirements (educator evaluation, data reporting, PARCC testing) require increasing and new investments that raise financial demands upon county school districts.

#### **Goals:**

The intent of the Berkshire County Education Task Force is to develop and recommend solutions that address the problem statement and specifically:

- Improve access, diversity, breadth and quality of educational programs for children county-wide so they are fully prepared for college, career and a life here in the Berkshires,
- Create economies of scale (financial savings) through new collaborations, technologies, partnerships, and regional agreements between towns/cities and districts,

- Advance new investments in collaborative solutions (ie. expanded pre-K programming, or special education services) that improve educational services and opportunities for children county-wide,
- Maintain and honor the unique identity of each Berkshire community, ensuring citizens remain fully connected and engaged with their schools,
- Reflect age appropriate social and learning practices, such as transportation/travel time and the number of school/grade transitions.

### **Awareness and Engagement:**

While many county citizens are generally aware of the financial constraints districts currently face, we recognize the need to further increase awareness and engagement pertaining to projected trends and the need to research, recommend, and reach agreement on potential near- and long- term solutions. In order to insure the recommended positive outcomes for children, the task force believes this effort will require the investment of critical stakeholder groups including:

- Berkshire County legislator delegation
- Business Community
- Parents
- School committees
- Students
- Superintendents
- Teachers
- Town and city elected and appointed leadership

### **Recommendations:**

The Berkshire County Education Task Force recommends the following actions.

1. Assemble a county-wide ad hoc task force that is composed of cross district/sector representation to advance research, propose solutions and recommendations, communicate with and broker stakeholder input, mobilize legislative/governance processes, and recommend preferred solutions
2. Secure funding and a project researcher to work with the task force on developing specific models as related to the problem statement and project goals. These models will include what would it look like if we “did nothing”, and three tiers (intensity) as follows:
  - a. Tier 1: Advance collaborative and shared services solutions such as cooperative purchasing, transportation, and shared special education programming.
  - b. Tier 2: Advance formal partnerships between geographically proximal districts (such as Lee-Lenox, North Adams-Adams).
  - c. Tier 3: Advance reorganization of the entire county into a super region (i.e. 1-3 districts).
3. Current and past findings from other consolidation and collaborative research inside and outside Berkshire County will be utilized in our advancement of knowledge going forward.
4. The Berkshire County Education Task Force will review models and develop recommendations that are shared with stakeholder groups and the general public. Specific timelines and work plans (roles, responsibilities, and targets) will be developed.
5. Legislative and governance support will be mobilized in support of preferred recommendations.
6. Proposed recommendations may be reflected in district budget models as early as FY17.