The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

2022 NSPRA Gold Medallion Entry

CATEGORY:
Special Communication Projects/Campaigns

Submitted by:
Emily Popek, Assistant Program Manager
emily.popek@neric.org
518-862-4900

Organization:
Capital Region BOCES Communications Service
900 Watervliet-Shaker Road
Albany, NY 12205

Where possible, please credit this entry to the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service.

Type of School/Organization:
Education Service Agency/BOCES

Number of Communications Staff: 3

Please consider this entry for a Golden Achievement Award.
The rural hamlet of Schenevus, N.Y., sits alongside Interstate 88 in central Otsego County. A community of about 650 residents, Schenevus has no mayor, no traffic lights and no grocery store, but it does have a bank, a post office — and a school.

The Schenevus Central School District is a client of the Capital Region BOCES Communications Service, which provides communications support to school districts and other clients across New York state. In 2020, facing declining enrollments and sharply rising costs, the district entered into a merger study with neighboring Worcester Central School. The study (a state requirement for any districts wishing to merge) was completed at the end of 2020 and presented to the two districts’ boards of education in January 2021.

Before the year was out, a total of six votes would be held before the question of merger between the two districts was officially settled. In June, the boards of education of both districts voted to put the question of merger to a public vote, scheduled for September. In September 2021, a majority of voters in both school districts supported an advisory referendum (or “straw poll”), indicating that the merger had sufficient community support. The school boards then petitioned the Commissioner of Education to call for a binding referendum in December.

It is not an exaggeration to say that no topic more fully held the attention of the community than merger during 2021, even as the global COVID-19 pandemic continued. Conversations about the merger were pervasive, divisive, and not always rational. In the end, the merger was defeated in a split decision, with 67% of Schenevus voters opposing the proposal and 65% of Worcester voters supporting it.

While the merger proposal was defeated, the school district, supported by the Communications Service, maintained its role as the first and best source of information about the contentious proposal.
The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

Communications Plan

Research

The Schenevus Central School District is a remote rural school district serving about 275 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The academic program is housed in a single, historic school building. The district comprises the rural communities of Schenevus, Maryland and Westford — a geographical area of about 75 square miles with a population of about 2,500 residents. The school is a hub of the small community, with many students among the second or third generation within their families to attend school in the same building and several alumni among the faculty and staff.

The Schenevus Central School District's single greatest source of funding is state aid, which accounts for 55%-60% of revenues in an average year. Local property tax revenues typically account for about one-third of revenues.

In New York state, public school districts are required to hold a public referendum to obtain voter approval of their annual budget. A 2012 law stipulates that any budget increase that exceeds a minimum tax levy limit must be approved by a supermajority of voters (60% or more). According to the Rockefeller Institute of Government, the “tax cap” has had the impact statewide of both lowering tax increases for property owners, and increasing the rate at which school budgets are passed by voters. Schenevus is no exception.

For several years prior to 2020, Schenevus CSD had annually proposed budgets calling for small tax levy increases, at or below the tax levy limit. As expenses grew faster than revenues, Schenevus implemented cost-cutting measures, but budget shortfalls remained. The district relied on its fund balance to fill these budget “gaps,” allowing the district to remain within the tax levy limit. The chart below shows the impact of reserve fund use on proposed budgets over a four-year period:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
<th>2017-18</th>
<th>2018-19</th>
<th>2019-20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total budget</td>
<td>$8,565,811</td>
<td>$9,050,553</td>
<td>$9,194,773</td>
<td>$9,049,317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase over prior year</td>
<td>$423,865</td>
<td>$484,742</td>
<td>$144,220</td>
<td>($145,456)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax levy increase if reserves had not been used</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>4.10%</td>
<td>No reserves used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual tax levy increase</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>3.85%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 “...the property tax has not only significantly cut the growth of school property taxes, but helped stabilize adoption of school budgets as well.” Malatras, Jim, et al. “As Albany Debates a Permanent Property Tax Cap, How Is the Cap Affecting School Budgets?” Rockefeller Institute of Government, 21 May 2019.

School districts in New York state are subject to periodic audits by the state Comptroller’s Office. A 2018 Comptroller’s audit of the district’s finances found that “Total general fund balance decreased by $567,000 (39 percent) in 2016-17, and officials appropriated $300,000 of fund balance for 2017-18 when only $226,400 was available.” This had the result of depleting the district’s financial reserves. As a result, the district focused on cost-saving measures during the period between 2018 and 2020, including shared services, tuitioning out students, and merging with a neighboring school district.

School merger studies are rare in New York state, and actual mergers even more so. According to the New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO) and information compiled from news reports, fewer than 25 merger studies have been conducted since 2000 among the state’s nearly 700 school districts. Of those, five have resulted in mergers. District records indicate that the Schenevus and Worcester central school districts conducted merger studies at least four times between 1974 and 1996, but at no time was there sufficient public support for a merger.

The two districts are similar in size and demographics, each housed in a single school building about five miles apart. The local media market is small, with one daily and one weekly paper. Regional television stations pay only occasional attention to the area. According to the 2020 Census, about 20% of the county lacks high-speed internet access. As such, school districts bear a significant communications burden to keep their publics well informed, and must overcome barriers of access.

According to the “Guide to the Reorganization of School Districts in New York State,” school districts must select a specific type of reorganization before beginning a merger study. In something of a compromise, the Schenevus and Worcester boards of education settled on an annexation merger by which Worcester would annex Schenevus — meaning the Schenevus Central School District would no longer exist if voters approved the proposal.

Planning

The communications goal for the Communications Service was to promote collaboration, transparency and engagement within the Schenevus and Worcester school communities to support an informed decision-making process for all stakeholders. The fiscal goal was to maximize existing resources to ensure a minimal impact on district finances.

Audiences

Key audiences were district leaders, district employees, students, families of students, and district residents.

→ District leaders comprised a small audience, including the superintendents of both school districts and their respective boards of education. Communication with this group was frequent and informal, taking place primarily via email and text message, as well as

---


4 A New York State Association of School Business Officials policy brief dated April 2014 lists 30 school districts that considered merger since 2010, representing a total of 17 merger studies. Internet searches and anecdotal research identified an additional three merger studies, for a total of 20, excluding Schenevus-Worcester.

5 “The statutes governing reorganization provide for five methods through which a school district may become merged with one or more of its neighbors. ... Each of the five reorganization procedures is limited in its application to one or more of the specific organizational types of school district.” Guide to the Reorganization of School Districts in New York State, (2015, May 27). New York State Education Department.
in-person and virtual meetings. As an audience, district leaders were highly engaged in the question of merger, and were greatly responsible for the success of the merger effort and associated communications. If either the boards or district leaders had wanted to “kill” the merger effort, they had ample opportunity to do so.

➔ **District employees** represented a key audience for two reasons: first, employees were likely to be directly affected by any merger, and second, district employees were key “influencers” within the community. Communication with district employees took place primarily via staff meetings, as well as email messages and communication via the districts’ websites.

➔ **Students** also represented a key audience in terms of their influence over the question of merger. Though few, if any, students were likely to cast ballots on the proposal, students would be the most directly impacted by a merger. Communication with students took place via email and through formal and informal meetings and conversations with district staff and leaders.

➔ **Families of students** were a vital audience for merger communications. Almost without exception, the parents and guardians of current students were also prospective voters, so this audience held direct decision-making influence over the merger proposal. Parents and guardians were highly engaged with their local school district, and received communications in a number of different formats, including mailers, email messages, automated phone and text messages, and material sent home by classroom teachers.

➔ **District residents** who were not also parents or guardians of K-12 students were also a key voting public, but in many cases, this audience was less engaged with their local school. Communication with this audience took place primarily through passive means, such as news reports and district websites, as well as the occasional printed mail piece. In addition, district residents were invited and encouraged to attend forums and meetings.

### Communications Objectives

➔ **Q1-Q2 Objective**: In a survey conducted prior to June 2021, at least 60% of respondents will say they felt well informed about the merger study’s findings.

➔ **Q3 Objective**: In an exit survey conducted in connection with the September advisory referendum, at least 75% of respondents will agree with the statement, “District officials have provided reliable, accurate information about the proposed merger.”

➔ **Q4 Objective (pending passage of September vote)**: In an exit survey conducted in connection to the December binding referendum, a majority of survey respondents will agree that “District officials are willing to listen to my concerns and suggestions.”

### Communications Strategies

➔ **Coordinate** information between the two school districts and their publics.

➔ **Promote** good-faith, two-way communications among key audiences.

➔ **Solicit and synthesize** public opinion about the proposed merger.

### Resources

Since financial difficulties prompted the Schenevus Central School District to seek a merger, demonstrating its cost-effectiveness was a priority. The district invested slightly more than 150 hours of Communications Service staff time into the campaign, and split the cost of printing and mailing three newsletters with Worcester Central School. Existing district communications channels
The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

(including websites, Facebook pages, and mass notifications systems) were used in the campaign at no additional cost to the district.

Implementation

Although only one of the two districts engaged in the merger process was a client, the Communications Service directed a unified, efficient, transparent approach for all merger communications, ensuring that all messages were communicated simultaneously by both districts in an agreed-upon manner and at an agreed-upon time.

Website

A merger website created by Worcester Central School in 2020 was maintained by the Communications Service throughout 2021 as a single point of contact for merger information. In addition, the Communications Service developed digital messages that were posted directly to the Schenevus CSD website, and shared with the Worcester CSD superintendent, for simultaneous distribution. These messages included:

- Notices of upcoming forums and events;
- Summaries of meetings;
- Announcements of board decisions;
- Publication of newsletters;
- Invitations to participate in public opinion surveys; and
- Other news and announcements related to the merger proposal.

Mailings

The service wrote and designed three newsletters, which were mailed to all postal customers in both districts in March, August and November 2021, to coincide with key phases of the merger process. To reduce printing costs, newsletters were designed and printed in black-and-white. Each newsletter featured a joint statement from the two district superintendents; a timeline of the merger process; and news about key upcoming merger events. In addition, each newsletter presented a targeted focus on issues of significance during that period.

In March, the four-page Merger Progress Report highlighted upcoming “Merger Mondays” public forums, and featured a Statement of Shared Commitments that had been developed by the two boards of education.

In September, the eight-page Merger Vote Newsletter publicized the upcoming Sept. 22 advisory referendum (or “straw poll”), highlighted myths and facts about the merger, and explored the circumstances that led the two districts to consider the merger proposal.

Finally, in November, an additional eight-page Merger Vote Newsletter publicized the Dec. 1 binding referendum, highlighted changes in the districts since the last merger study (in 1996), and shared results from public opinion surveys conducted at the time of the September balloting.

Public Engagement

Between January and May, the two districts jointly hosted monthly “Merger Monday” public forums (first via Zoom, and later in person), moderated by a representative of the Communications Service. News of the forums was shared via a media release to local newspapers and publicized on district
The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

websites. A Facebook event was set up for each forum, with both districts listed as co-hosts. Automated email messages reminding parents and employees of the events were sent out by each district. Each monthly forum featured a different topic:

- **Feb. 8 (virtual):** Panel discussion with Board of Education presidents
- **March 8 (virtual):** Panel discussion with Schenevus and Worcester middle and high school students
- **April 12 (virtual):** Panel discussion with representatives from four regional merged school districts (including alumni, former employees and administrators)
- **May 10 (virtual):** Open forum and Q&A with district superintendents and Board of Education presidents
- **June 14 (in-person):** Panel discussion with local elected officials (county and state representatives)

Average attendance for the “Merger Mondays” forums ranged between 30-75 people.

In September 2021, the superintendents of the Schenevus and Worcester central school districts scheduled in-person meetings with all of the two districts’ students in Grades 5 through 12. Together, the two superintendents visited classrooms in both school buildings to explain the merger process to students and answer their questions. At that time, students were invited to complete an anonymous online survey to share their opinions about the proposed merger.

In November 2021, a public forum was held at Worcester Central School in advance of the binding referendum vote on Dec. 1. The event featured remarks by the presidents of both districts’ boards of education, and small-group discussion facilitated by moderators. About 50 people participated in the event. Four discussion groups were held in-person, with a fifth group moderated remotely via Zoom for virtual attendees. Discussions were focused on four questions:

- What are your concerns about what might happen in your local school district?
- How would you like to see the district address these concerns?
- Where do you want to see your local school district five years from now?
- Moving forward, how do you want to be involved when big decisions are being made in your district?

Following the small-group discussions, the larger group reconvened, and each moderator reported out about the topics that came up in their discussion.

Public Opinion Research

Informal public opinion surveys were conducted in May, September and December 2021, with survey reports posted to the merger website.

Each survey was conducted in connection with a vote (at the districts’ annual school budget vote in May and at merger votes in September and December). In each instance, identical paper copies of the survey were produced for each district, and made available to voters at the polls.

In addition, all district residents were invited to participate in an online survey that was publicized on both districts’ websites and Facebook pages. The online survey invited respondents to indicate their district of residence, so that survey results could be viewed as a whole, and also divided by demographic. Responses from the paper surveys were added to the online survey so that all responses could be analyzed as a group.
Evaluation

While the merger itself was not a success, the communications campaign achieved its objectives of promoting an informed decision-making process in a polarized and highly contentious environment.

- In the May 2021 exit poll, a majority of respondents (51%) indicated they felt very well informed about the merger.
- In a September 2021 exit poll, a majority of respondents (72%) indicated they felt very well informed.
- In a December 2021 exit poll, a majority of survey respondents agreed with the statement that “District officials are willing to listen to my concerns and suggestions” (27%: “strongly agree”; 28%: “agree”).
The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

Supplemental Materials

MERGER WEBSITE

In September's straw poll, residents of the Schenevus and Worcester central school districts approved a proposal to combine the two districts into a single district by annexation merger. A binding referendum will be held in December 2021. The outcome of the December vote will determine whether the districts merge. All eligible voters are strongly encouraged to vote in December. This vote is the final stage in the merger process.

Merger Forum Notes: November 2021

On Nov. 5, the Schenevus and Worcester central school districts hosted a public forum to discuss the proposed merger of the two districts.

Click the event for participants' notes or to participate in real-time discussions. Notes from these conversations have been compiled into a report and can be found on the public site here.

Merger Report: November 2021

View a PDF: Schenevus-Worcester Merger Report, November 2021

Capital Region BOCES Communications Service | https://capitalregionboces.org/communications
The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

‘MERGER MONDAYS’ WEB FORUMS
Click to view video recordings and written summaries from ‘Merger Mondays’ forums held during the spring of 2021

The second ‘Merger Mondays’ online forum was held Monday, March 9, 2021, hosted by the Schenectady and Worchester central school district superintendents and Board of Education presidents, as well as the Capital Region BOCES superintendent. About 60 people logged into the webinar presentation to hear from a panel of junior and senior high school students from both districts. The conversation kicked off with a roundtable conversation among the students about what they foresaw student life would be like within a merged district. Students spoke passionately about how the larger school district would offer more opportunities for the students locally in general, but that it could also provide an individual student chances at a top spot in their academic class or extracurricular activity.

“Think that it would be a great opportunity to maybe add more sports and more classes and also for the students to have more opportunities to meet new people and see friends,” said Daisy Knapp. But also asked, “I think that it would be a great opportunity to maybe add more sports and more classes and also for the students to have more opportunities to meet new people and see friends,” said Daisy Knapp. She also asked, “A challenge that would be is that students coming over wouldn’t have that much representation so class officers or sports captains.”

The theme of trade-offs continued through the evening’s discussion, as viewers in the audience asked students to weigh in on things that might make wave integration into a merged district, like teen-living activities or reuniting the districts to reflect its merged status. One student pointed out that activities the teen-living would take place even before the merger was finalized.

Many of the questions that came up in the conversation were issues that the merger study did not address, such as the capacity of the school buildings, class sizes in a merged district, and possible transportation times for bus runs.
The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

MERGER NEWSLETTERS

Click the individual links below to view full PDFs of each merger report:

November 2021 Merger Report

September 2021 Merger Report

March 2021 Merger Report
The Challenge of Merging School Districts: Presenting a United Front in a Divided Community

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

Click the link above to review reports from each public opinion survey conducted during 2021.

---

**Schenectady CSD December 2021 Public Opinion Survey**

How did you vote on the proposed MERGER?
- In favor (YES vote)
- Against (NO vote)

Why did you vote the way you did? (Please check all that apply)
- I voted YES because the merger will be good for students
- I voted YES because the merger will be good for taxpayers
- I voted YES because the merger will be good for our community
- I voted NO because the merger will not be good for students
- I voted NO because the merger will not be good for taxpayers
- I voted NO because the merger will not be good for our community

Please mark the boxes below to indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District officials have provided reliable, accurate information about the proposed merger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District officials are willing to listen to concerns and suggestions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If our district merges, I am more likely to trust district officials to act in the best interests of the community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If our district merges, I am more likely to trust district officials to clean up the community when important decisions are being made</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is your relationship to SCHENECTADY CSD? Check any that apply:
- Relative of current Schenectady student(s)
- Employee
- Former student (alumni)
- Current student
- Taxpayer in the district

What is your relationship to SCHENECTADY CSD? Check any that apply:
- Relative of current WORCESTER student(s)
- Employee
- Former student (alumni)
- Current student
- Taxpayer in the district

---

**Schenectady CSD September 2021 Public Opinion Survey**

How did you vote on the proposed MERGER?
- In favor (YES vote)
- Against (NO vote)

Why did you vote the way you did? (Please check all that apply)
- I voted YES because the merger would be good for students
- I voted YES because the merger would be good for taxpayers
- I voted YES because the merger would be good for our community
- I voted NO because the merger would not be good for students
- I voted NO because the merger would not be good for taxpayers
- I voted NO because the merger would not be good for our community

How informed do you feel about the proposed merger? (Please mark ONE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not informed at all</th>
<th>Somewhat informed</th>
<th>Very well informed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

What is your relationship to SCHENECTADY CSD? Check any that apply, or select “none of the above.”
- Parent of student(s)
- Employee
- Graduate
- Current student
- None of the above

What is your relationship to WORCESTER CSD? Check any that apply, or select “none of the above.”
- Parent of student(s)
- Employee
- Graduate
- Current student
- None of the above

Please feel free to share any comments or feedback. Your responses are anonymous:

---

Use reverse side if needed for additional comments.