

Q&A - Elmira Heights/Horseheads Consolidation Study

What is the incentive aid?

Incentive aid is state aid provided to districts who consolidate, or merge, into one district. Incentive aid is provided by the state when a merged district realizes cost savings over the budgets of the previous districts. This is why a study is required before communities vote on a merger. The study must show that by merging, the two districts would save costs.

In the Elmira Heights/Horseheads Consolidation Feasibility Study, the incentive aid is shown to be approximately \$6.2 million in each of the first five years, with incentive aid diminishing each year until the incentive aid ends in Year 15.

Did the consultants use the five-year enrollment projection to do the study?

Yes. The projects indicate that enrollment numbers would hold steady.

How does the straw poll/vote work?

The straw poll, or straw vote, is a non-binding public referendum.

In the Elmira Heights/Horseheads Consolidation Study, the straw vote is scheduled for Thursday, December 3, 7am to 8pm in both districts, with the two communities voting separately. Voters will be asked if the districts should merge into one combined district.

If the straw vote does not pass in either district or both districts, the process ends and the districts will remain as two separate districts.

If the straw vote on December 3 passes in both districts, the state will set a date for a binding vote, probably in January 2016. Voters will again be asked if the districts should merge and how many members should be on the new board of education.

If the binding vote fails in either district or both districts, the process ends and the districts will remain separate.

If that binding vote passes in both districts, the districts will combine into one new district effective July 1, 2016. A new board of education will then be formed through elections, based on the number of members selected at the binding referendum.

The new board will begin setting up the new district, including hiring a superintendent and selecting a new name, mascot, and logo. The resulting district will be brand new; the Elmira Heights and Horseheads districts would no longer exist.

Could the incentive aid promised in a merger be taken away?

The state offers incentive aid to consolidated, annexed, or merged districts if a savings can be shown by combining the districts into one new district. If the merged district does not realize the savings shown in the consolidation study, the state will not provide the incentive aid.

Additionally, there is no guarantee that an unknown occurrence would cause the state to hold back aid that was promised to the district. Beginning in 2007, the state took back a portion of state aid promised to all districts in the state. This amount taken back by the state is called the “gap elimination adjustment,” or GEA.

However, to the best of our knowledge, there is no precedent where the state has withheld promised merger incentive aid.

Would there be block scheduling at the high school in a merged district?

If the districts merge, all educational decisions would be determined by the board of education of the merged district, with guidance and assistance from the new administration. The new district would begin in the 2016-17 school year, and all high school students would be placed at the Horseheads High School location.

Why wasn't redistribution of schools (drawing new attendance zones) addressed in the study?

Any changes in attendance zones for elementary schools would be determined by the board of education of the merged district with guidance from the new administration; therefore, the study did not address specific decisions that the new board would be required to make, such as attendance zones, curriculum, scheduling, etc.

Why weren't the concerns addressed in the study?

Each consulting firm uses their own methods for developing a study. The state does not allow for boards of education to review the consultants' final report prior to submission and approval by the state. The benefits and concerns outlined by the Elmira Heights and Horseheads boards of education were developed after the report was submitted to the state.

Does the study show that education will be maintained or improved in a merged district?

The consolidation study, which was conducted by consultants, determined that a merged district would provide increased educational opportunities for Elmira Heights students, and would maintain the educational opportunities in the Horseheads district. The staff projections used in the study allowed for the maintenance of current programs, but not for the restoration of programs lost in both districts in recent years.

Will services for students with special needs be the same in a merged district? Could there be fewer supports for students?

In a merged district, special education services would be provided to students using the same process as is currently in place. The Elmira Heights and Horseheads districts both provide special education services, but not necessarily the same services. By law, a merged district would have to provide appropriate services for students with special needs.

From your perspective, can the districts survive without merging?

Districts have faced major economic struggles for the past several years. It is the job of the superintendent and board of education to make sure a district will survive for the best of its students and community.

Do the districts have the same curriculum?

There are differences in curriculum in the two districts. In a merged districts, this would have to be resolved by the new board of education and administration.

Describe the funding system in New York State. Is this why the study came about?

New York State provides state education aid to districts based on a complex formula. School districts in the state fund education through a combination of state aid and property taxes.

In 2008, the state began taking back a portion of the state aid allocated to districts in order to balance the state budget. This take-back is called the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA). Districts, including Horseheads and Elmira Heights, had to make up for this subtraction of aid through program and staff reductions. During this time, the state also implemented a property tax cap, again using a complex formula that determines a cap on the tax increase sets by districts in their budgets.

Districts also looked to consolidate services. The Horseheads and Elmira Heights districts already share services including transportation, facilities supervision, and food service management. This study came about as a way for the districts to further explore the benefits and drawbacks of a consolidated district.

What will happen if the straw vote is turned down?

If the straw vote on December 3 fails in either district – that is, if more than 50% of the voters vote no, the consolidation study stops. No further discussion on a potential merger would take place.

Can the state force the districts to merge?

The current process for merging districts in the State of New York requires a consolidation study and vote by the affected districts. Therefore, the state cannot force districts to merge at this time.

In a new district, would the Heights be represented on the new board of education?

If the straw vote on December 3 passes in both districts, a second, binding vote will be held on a date directed by the state. At that time, voters will be asked if the districts should merge, and if so, how many members should be on the new district's board of education.

If the binding vote passes, another election will be scheduled to elect board of education members. Candidates will run at large, meaning they do not represent a certain area of the new district. Those candidates receiving the highest number of votes will be seated on the new board of education, regardless of whether they reside in the Horseheads or Elmira Heights district.

Why does Elmira Heights have higher taxes when there is more poverty (50% free/reduced meals) and the teachers are paid less?

Several factors contribute to tax rates. The Elmira Heights district is smaller than the Horseheads district; therefore, there is a much smaller tax base in Elmira Heights. Though Elmira Heights may pay teachers and staff less than Horseheads, there are fewer taxpayers

to contribute to the cost of running a district. School taxes make up the difference between what districts receive from the state (and other revenue sources such as federal grants, etc) and the total budget.

Could the study have occurred over a longer period of time so that there wouldn't be just a few months to put a new district into place?

The consolidation provides a short time frame to merge the districts, if the votes pass. The SED selects the time line for studies to be conducted and funded. The state currently does not allow for an extended time period for implementation of a merged district.

If the consolidation were approved, buildings would need renovations, specifically in the high school. What would happen to the students during renovations?

Any school construction project must go through a state approval process. Completion of capital projects can take a minimum of three to five years. During this time, a district must use the spaces it has available to operate and house its students. This however does not eliminate the need to show savings in order to receive the incentive aid.

What about other costs that were not specifically addressed in the study, such as new athletic facilities, the potential of paying three superintendents, busing, purchasing of textbooks, etc.?

All costs for the merged district would have to be addressed by the new board of education and administration. These costs would have to be considered in relationship to the entire financial package, while meeting the requirements of cost savings identified during the merger study. The new board of education and administration would determine how incentive aid would be used.

Could this consolidation lead to higher class sizes?

Any change in the operation of a district can lead to lower or higher class sizes. Because the merger study requires a cost savings to be realized in order to receive incentive aid, class sizes will most likely not be lower. In order to realize the cost savings, there is a potential for changes in class size.

How would you explain the need of the merger to those who it impacts the most, the students?

We would discuss the changes with students to help them understand the process and perspective of the study. The final outcome of this study will be felt by students the most, in whatever part of school is important to them, whether it is academics, athletics, the arts, the social aspect, etc. Students are resilient; the new district's job would be to work with students to help them understand the changes that would come about in a merged district.

If the consolidation was to occur, is there a possibility that there could still be fund reductions in the future? If so, how will it be handled?

There is always the potential for reductions in revenue and expenses. The board of education and administration of a merged district would have to keep informed of how the state deals with future financial issues and funding of public education, and address any changes accordingly, in order to provide the best education possible for its students with the resources available to the district.

How many students are in the Elmira Heights and Horseheads districts? How many five years ago; how many ten years ago?

In the 2014-15 school year, the Elmira Heights district had 1,058 students; the Horseheads district had 4,021 students.

In 2009-10, the Elmira Heights district had 1,088 students; the Horseheads district had 4,272 students.

In 2004-05, enrollment in Elmira Heights was 1,101; enrollment in Horseheads was 4,336. Please note: these figures do not include pre-kindergarten students.

If the merger happens, will staff be reduced? How?

The study has projected that reductions in staffing would be necessary for the new district to realize savings. If the merger occurs, the new board of education and administration will determine staffing after considering factors like enrollment, desired class size and services necessary to deliver the educational program that fall within budget parameters for the newly formed district.

Other mergers have happened in the state. Have the districts talked to these districts and learned from others?

Yes. Districts have merged successfully in the past, however, some Districts have not merged and are still as successful.

We have learned it is very important that if districts consolidate, the new district must come up with a long-term financial plan that does not rely on incentive aid long term. There have been instances in merged districts that when the money and aid ran out, the merged district called for double-digit tax increases to balance their budgets. A merged district must plan for the future and for the incentive aid as well as for when it runs out.

We also learned that when districts come together and contracts are negotiated, many times there are enhancements (leveling up) – in other words, benefits not in one district’s contract are often included in the new district’s contracts (ex. -the best salaries or benefits possible in both contracts become part of the new contract), so there may be increased cost implications for any merger as well.

Why do we spend less per student in our area?

Both districts spend less per student than the state average for each district’s similar schools grouping. This is because state aid is distributed differently in the various areas of New York State and the two communities have less to spend than other districts. It also means that both districts have worked to control costs without additional assistance from the State.

How does leveling up work? How would it be funded?

‘Leveling up’ refers to bringing new contracts in a merged district up to the same level for both districts together.

For example,
Contract A has better health insurance than Contract B.
Contract B has higher starting salaries than Contract A.

In negotiating for the new unit in a merged district, the members (made up of employees in both districts, one with Contract A and the other with Contract B), want the better health care from Contract A and the higher starting pay from Contract B. This has to be negotiated with the new board of education, and any increased benefits must be paid for in the budget.

Keep in mind that merging two districts is the same as starting a brand new school district: the new board of education must come to terms with the new units to move forward, and the plan provides for a short time period before the new district begins.

The study does not specifically provide funding for leveling up, other than including a percentage increase for recurring costs. In a merger, the new board would have to determine how to pay for any increased costs due to leveling up and yet balance the new budget for the district.

If incentive aid should not be used for recurring expenses such as leveling up, how should these expenses be paid for? Where is that money coming from?

The study suggests that the use of incentive aid for recurring items such as salaries and leveling up is not recommended. This is because incentive aid diminishes and then is removed altogether over time. Recurring costs are just that – recurring. If by chance a merged district relies on incentive aid to cover ~~for~~ recurring costs such as salaries and leveling up, the district must slowly wean off of the use of this aid and use other revenues to cover these costs or make reductions to balance the new and future budgets.

The state education department approved the final report before the board saw it; did the SED make any changes to the report?

To the best of our knowledge, no. We understand there were questions of clarification presented to the consultants, but it is not usually their practice to change the report.

Is there pre-kindergarten in both districts?

Yes. Elmira Heights has two half-day pre-kindergarten classes. The Horseheads district has seven full-day classes in its four elementary schools, and two half-day classes in an outside location. Neither district currently has the capacity to service all eligible pre-kindergarten aged students.

If the merger does not happen, have the districts made plans for the future?

Both boards of education have continued to plan for the future. In the last several years, both districts' boards of education have worked to combat the fiscal and educational challenges that all districts across the state have been faced with.

If the merger does not occur, both districts will continue to move forward; each district will address its challenges and needs as it is currently doing. Our obligation is to determine how we can save programs for our children, provide the best programs within our ability

to pay for them, and we continue to do so as we move forward. Currently, the Elmira Heights and Horseheads districts share some services, including transportation, food service, and facilities management and will continue to explore sharing additional services where possible.

What are the graduation rates, SAT scores, achievement data in both districts?

Graduation Rates:

<i>Year</i>	<i># 4 Year Cohort</i>	<i>% Total Graduates</i>	<i>% Regents Diploma</i>	<i>% Regents Advanced Diploma</i>	<i>% Local Diploma</i>	<i>% GED</i>	<i>% Still Enrolled</i>	<i>% IEP Diploma</i>	<i>% Dropped Out</i>
Elmira Heights									
June 2013	96	79.2	45.8	27.1	6.3	0	13.5	0	7.3
Aug 2013	96	84.4	50.0	27.1	7.3	0	8.3	0	7.3
June 2012	71	71.8	32.4	38.0	1.4	0	16.9	1.4	9.9
Aug 2012	71	83.1	42.3	38.0	2.8	0	5.6	1.4	9.9
Horseheads									
June 2013	316	85.1	32.3	48.4	4.4	0.3	7.9	0.9	5.1
Aug 2013	316	87.0	33.9	48.4	4.4	0.3	6.0	0.9	5.1
June 2012	348	76.1	30.7	42.5	2.9	2.0	12.6	1.1	8.0
Aug 2012	348	80.5	33.9	42.8	3.7	2.0	8.3	1.1	8.0

Grades 3-8 NYS Assessment Data – Percent Scoring at Levels 3 and 4:

	<i>Elmira Heights</i>			<i>Horseheads</i>			<i>New York State</i>		
	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>
Grade 3 ELA	27%	27%	29%	42%	38%	45%	31%	32%	31%
Grade 4 ELA	24%	27%	27%	34%	45%	48%	30%	32%	33%
Grade 5 ELA	38%	25%	25%	34%	37%	33%	30%	29%	30%
Grade 6 ELA	20%	29%	13%	37%	38%	37%	30%	28%	31%
Grade 7 ELA	27%	16%	33%	33%	37%	35%	31%	28%	29%
Grade 8 ELA	36%	27%	16%	49%	46%	45%	34%	34%	35%
Grade 3 Math	31%	39%	50%	43%	47%	57%	34%	42%	42%
Grade 4 Math	29%	26%	39%	49%	56%	61%	36%	42%	43%
Grade 5 Math	25%	43%	40%	35%	39%	48%	30%	39%	43%
Grade 6 Math	14%	28%	26%	39%	48%	50%	31%	37%	39%
Grade 7 Math	28%	28%	40%	34%	44%	45%	28%	32%	35%
Grade 8 Math	13%	7%	14%	43%	29%	29%	28%	22%	22%

Percentage of Students Scoring Fail/Pass/Mastery (score of 85% or above) on NYS

Regents Exams:

	<i>Elmira Heights</i>						<i>Horseheads</i>					
	<i>2013</i>			<i>2014</i>			<i>2013</i>			<i>2014</i>		
	<i>Fail <65</i>	<i>Pass 65+</i>	<i>85+</i>	<i>Fail <65</i>	<i>Pass 65+</i>	<i>85+</i>	<i>Fail <65</i>	<i>Pass 65+</i>	<i>85+</i>	<i>Fail <65</i>	<i>Pass 65+</i>	<i>85+</i>
English	25	75	19	14	86	33	13	87	44	12	88	47
Integrated Algebra	26	74	24	30	70	1	14	86	21	16	84	18
Geometry	44	56	8	55	45	8	13	87	20	16	84	22

Algebra 2 Trig	75	25	5	48	52	10	21	79	32	39	61	16
Global History	32	68	29	30	70	21	15	85	49	30	70	38
US History	21	79	35	10	90	55	9	91	64	8	92	63
Biology	16	84	27	15	85	21	3	97	58	2	98	67
Earth Science	30	70	25	24	76	28	18	82	44	17	83	49
Chemistry	N/A			23	67	7	8	92	36	9	91	32
Physics	N/A			25	75	35	1	99	67	4	96	69

Please note: School district data can be found on the New York State Education Department's website at <http://data.nysed.gov/>.

What programs have been eliminated in both districts?

Program reductions are listed on pp. 51-52 of the study.

Please note that the study does not provide for the restoration of eliminated programs.

Since 2008, Elmira Heights eliminated programs including the school resource officer, the Student Transition and Recovery (STAR) Program, French I, French II, and French III, alternative education at the middle school level, high school and middle school marching band, jazz band, and career development programs.

In Horseheads since 2008, eliminated programs include the STAR Program, math and technology enrichment at the intermediate school level, the GED program through BOCES, middle and high school alternative education, school resource officer at the middle/intermediate school, outsourced tutoring for suspended students, grade level and department chairpersons, grade 4 swimming unit, art enrichment and project-based learning at grades 2-4, German, Extended School Year principal, videoconferencing, and computer lab teaching assistants. In addition, physical education and K-4 vocal music instruction were reduced.

Additionally, both districts reduced instructional and non-instructional staff during this time period.

How will closing Edison High School benefit a merged district?

The state requires that districts must show cost savings if they merge into one district. The consultants in this study determined that in a merged district, the high school would be at Horseheads High School, and Edison, while in excellent condition, would not be needed in a merged district.

The study determined that Edison was not large enough to encompass one grade of students in a merged district. Closing of Edison, and Center Street Elementary School in Horseheads, was determined to save costs and meet the requirements of the merger study. In a merged district, current and future use of buildings would be determined by the new board of education and administration.

The report states that Elmira Heights students will have more opportunities. What are those opportunities?

Elmira Heights students will have course opportunities that they currently do not have, simply because Elmira Heights is a smaller district, and a larger district has more resources and students to offer more courses. (For more information, the Curriculum and Instruction section of the study begins on page 32 and outlines courses currently offered.)

Busing in a merged district is a potential issue. Will all students be bused? What will the costs be?

Busing would be determined by the new board of education and administration in a merged district. Currently, Horseheads and Elmira Heights have different busing policies. The new board would have to determine its new busing policy, and there may be additional costs involved. The study determined that busing would be an increased cost in a merged district.

If the merger happens, schools will be bigger. How will security be addressed?

Security is a priority; in both districts; and daily operations are driven by providing safety for our children and quality education to the best of our ability. Horseheads currently has a school resource officer (SRO) through the Chemung County Sheriff's Department. Again, the new board of education and administration would determine this program. If a merger occurs and the new district keeps the program, there will be an SRO at the new high school.

What capital projects are needed?

Both districts are currently conducting building condition surveys (BCS) as required by the state. Capital improvements necessary in existing buildings are identified through this BCS process and these improvements will be necessary as independent districts or as a consolidated district. There are costs associated with potential upgrades and capital projects currently take three to five years to complete from initial discussions to completion. The scope of facility upgrades in a consolidated district would have to be determined by the new board of education and may change based on grade configuration and building use decisions that are made.

The study does not fully address salaries, curriculum, and redistricting. Would there be additional costs for these three areas?

Again, this depends upon the new board of education and administration, but there are potential additional costs for these areas. If the merger occurs, the new board of education and administration would have to plan for these areas and use incentive funds and other revenues to cover these costs.

What is the building aid for the two districts currently? What is it for a merged district?

Currently, building aid is approximately 90% in Elmira Heights and 80% in Horseheads. In a merged district, building aid is 95% for projects that are fully aidable. The state reimburses districts in the year following the expenditure.

If a merger happens and rezoning occurs, is it possible for a child to then have to go to another school district altogether?

The merged district would be made up of the boundaries of the Elmira Heights district and the Horseheads district. A home would not be moved to another district, such as Elmira or Corning.

If the merger is approved, how much of the study does the new board of education have to follow? Doesn't the study just recommend actions?

In a merger, the new district would have a set budget with the study's projected savings already built into the dollar amount. The new Board of Education and administration can do what they would like providing they stay within the limits of the new budget, The new merged district will not get any additional monies and the new board must realize savings set forth in the budget in order to receive the incentive aid.

Are there plans for any organization, such as BOCES, to purchase the Edison building?

Not at this time and not until a merger happens, if it happens. The current boards cannot make decisions in anticipation of a merger. It also should be noted that BOCES would not be able to house special needs students only at this facility, as students are required to be integrated in to a regular school setting.

What happens if a district can't survive?

If a district becomes insolvent, the district must do what the state says to rectify it; the community voice potentially goes away. However, the state is required to offer free and appropriate public education to all students of New York State.

Insolvency hasn't happened yet; however, some districts have come close and the state has assisted as necessary. It is important to note, if we are all traveling on the same difficult financial path, the state must solve its funding inequity problem for all schools whether they merge or not.

Are there state aid options if we don't merge?

Yes. The state needs to fully fund its foundation aid obligations to all schools in the state, as well as they must fully restore all remaining GEA funds to districts. Additionally, the state needs to comply with a State Supreme court decision, from the earlier Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit, that substantially increases the state's fiscal obligation to all schools in the state.

If the merger does not happen and the \$60 million promised for a merger is not used, does it go to another district?

No, the state would simply reallocate the money to other budgetary items.