

## Pauline Liu: Ulster event will ponder future of education

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Consolidation has become a watchword in public education. It's not just that the state wants schools to consolidate. In the face of declining enrollment, soaring costs, plummeting revenue and school aid, school districts seem to be left with few other options.

As school districts and teachers try to plan ahead, many have wondered out loud what the future of education will look like for our kids.

A symposium at SUNY New Paltz will attempt to begin tackling that timely subject this week. The event is called "A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County."

It's being held Friday and hosted by The Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach. It takes place from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Student Union Building on the SUNY New Paltz campus.

The conference is the brainchild of the Legislative Action Committee of the Ulster County School Boards Association. It's a great, proactive idea; 2020 isn't all that far into the future, and time is running out.

The school district where my daughter attends school expects to go broke in about two years.

It's not alone.

According to one statewide study, nearly half of the roughly 700 school districts in New York are expected to become insolvent within the next three years.

"We want to be proactive and come up with our own solutions, rather than have them imposed on us by the state," said Kingston school board member James F. Shaughnessy, Jr., who is one of the organizers.

What will education in Ulster County look like in about six years? Shaughnessy won't venture to guess.

"What we want to do is explore the possibilities, so we're going to form study groups to study ideas over the next year," he said. Shaughnessy explained that the game plan is for committees to reconvene next year to share their findings.

According to Shaughnessy, "2020 Vision" isn't an open conference. It's intended for Ulster County stakeholders only. Anyone who hasn't received an invitation but is interested in attending should contact their local school district.

"We're leaving it to the school boards and superintendents to make the selections of people who will attend," said Shaughnessy.

Organizers are hoping to hear from a variety of voices, including parents, community members, teachers, superintendents and lawmakers.

"We're very interested in regional thinking, and education is the most important service of local government, so (hosting) this was a natural for us," said Gerald Benjamin, CRREO director.

The collaborative county effort is the first of its kind in the mid-Hudson. If it's successful, Shaughnessy hopes it can serve as a template for other counties and perhaps even the state.

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