

## Group brainstorms education in Ulster

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NEW PALTZ — A regional high school. A later schedule for secondary school students. Shorter summer vacations.

Those were just some of the ideas proposed Friday as a group of Ulster County's teachers, parents, administrators, school boards, analysts and community members met to brainstorm about the future of education.

The symposium, "A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County," was held at SUNY New Paltz.

The event, which drew a crowd of about 120, was organized by the Legislative Action Committee of the Ulster County School Boards Association.

"This is historic, because we're approaching something on a county scale, and we have to find new solutions," said Gerald Benjamin, director of the Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, which hosted the conference.

With enrollment and school aid declining and costs of education soaring, much of the discussion turned to consolidation. According to Benjamin, the bottom line is "questions of scale." What size should a school district be?

For those who came expecting to hear talk about countywide school districts, the subject never came up.

Countywide districts exist in several states, including Virginia, South Carolina, Florida, Texas and Tennessee, but no one proposed the idea for Ulster County.

Instead, a number of teachers and school board members discussed the need for districts to keep their local character and serve as community centers.

While some suggested that the idea of a regional high school should be studied, Kingston Superintendent Paul Padalino said the county is too large geographically for such an idea to be practical.

He told the crowd not to expect any "flying cars" in the year 2020 — or for school districts to merge.

"It think it will look very similar to what we have now," said Padalino, whose district reduced its number of elementary schools from 11 to seven in the past few years. "I don't believe there is the political or local will to enact that kind of change," he added.

Educators also discussed how to improve the system, citing how some districts saw improvements in performance for high school students after schools switched to a later schedule.

Columbia University professor Thomas Hatch compared how U.S. students are lagging behind their counterparts in Singapore and Finland. He discussed the differences in educational systems.

"The U.S. system is highly decentralized and fragmented, with strong emphasis on individualism," said Hatch.

Ulster County Executive Mike Hein told the group that they have "an opportunity to do something spectacular."

State Sen. Cecilia Tkaczyk, D-Duanesburg, called on school communities to demand more state aid and hold lawmakers accountable.

As for the proposals that were generated from the event — some attendees volunteered to study them in depth and present their findings next year, said Kingston school board member James Shaughnessy Jr., who is one of the organizers.

"I think it has generated a lot of enthusiasm for ongoing study," said Shaughnessy.

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