

A 2020 VISION

FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION in ULSTER COUNTY

**Sharing Educational
Programs: A Quasi-Magnet
Model for Ulster County
High Schools**

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**The Benjamin Center, SUNY New Paltz
Ulster County School Boards Association**

Sharing Educational Programs: A Quasi-Magnet Model for Ulster County High Schools

Ulster County public schools employ approximately 2,400 professional staff and spend almost \$600 million every year to educate 22,600 children. This big commitment is widely supported. This year, all of the county's school district budgets were passed on first offering.

Public education in New York is legally a state government responsibility but, in recent years, more than six of every ten school dollars has been raised locally from the real property tax. Additional money is regularly borrowed by the county's school districts, with public approval, to assure that facilities are modern, safe, and support learning. This money must be paid back, adding to annual costs. Ulster's residents' property tax burden—mostly for schools—is substantial.

It is no surprise, therefore, that public policy at the state and local level has been focused on limiting the growth of this burden; the Tax Levy Limit, which restrains the amount of local taxes that school districts and municipalities can raise, is one example. This has had a big impact on public education. One result has been a scaling back, in some school districts, of programming: for example, diminished foreign language instruction at the secondary level and fewer specialty teachers at the elementary level. As important, however, is that these constraints limit school districts' abilities to *grow* their programming, to expand into new arenas that are responsive to our quickly changing technological society.

This challenge is enhanced by the rapidly changing nature of Ulster County's school population. It is more diverse demographically and comes from families that are, on average, less resourced. In 2009-10, 32% of Ulster County public school students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, 2% were classified as limited

English proficient, and 15% were classified as students with disabilities; in 2015-16, those numbers had risen to 45% qualified for free or reduced price lunch, 3% for whom English was a new language, and 19% students with disabilities. On top of this demographic shift, each year, the county as a whole serves fewer kids in the public schools; 25,578 in 2009–10 and 22,577 in 2015–16. This decline is projected to continue for some Ulster school districts.

In this environment, school leaders, elected board members and professional educators are regularly called upon to sustain educational quality by doing more with less. Efficiency without diminished effectiveness is the mantra. The result is sometimes traumatic: closed schools, and the concomitant threat of diminished communities. We remain continually challenged to determine how we can keep vital school districts at the center of our communities, while still enhancing educational opportunities for our children.

Within the context of the high costs of education, and the joint constraints of declining enrollment and fiscal austerity, how can school districts provide more opportunities for their students? In urban centers, large student populations allow the diversification of academic trajectories. New York City, with over one million students, is one obvious example; students with an interest in medical fields can enroll in Clara Barton High School, Abraham Lincoln High School has courses in veterinary science, and the High School for Innovation in Advertising and Media offers coursework in advertising and media design.¹ Even smaller cities exhibit this diversity. In Hartford, Connecticut, which has an enrollment of about 21,000 (approximately 6,000 in high school), secondary students can choose from schools that focus on the culinary arts, engineering

¹ New York City Department of Education, School Finder, <http://schools.nyc.gov/ChoicesEnrollment/High/Resources/default.htm>



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and green technology, or nursing and health sciences, to name just a few.² With these large enrollments, schools are able to diversify their course offerings and offer more—beyond just the basics—to their students.

School districts with small student enrollments, tight budgets, and fewer potential enrollees per class, however, are challenged to create this level of scale and offer a diverse range of courses. Past solutions to this challenge of scale have focused on increasing the size of educational institutions—school districts, of course, but also schools themselves and even classrooms—through consolidation. This has been a persistent strategy throughout the history of organized public education in New York, beginning with Chapter 5 of the Laws of 1914 and continuing through the Master Plan for School District Reorganization in 1947 (and its revision in 1958). Through these efforts, New York State reduced the number of districts from 11,780 in the late 19th century to the 733 in operation today.³ But in recent years the number of consolidations has declined precipitously. People know that their schools are at the heart of their communities, and want to keep them there. Earlier Benjamin Center research showed that consolidation is now rarely a practical option for upstate school districts.⁴

At the same time that the State was advancing an agenda of consolidation, it also developed a mechanism to create economies of scale through collaboration among nonurban school districts.⁵ Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) were created in 1948 to “enable small rural school districts to combine their

resources to provide services that otherwise would have been uneconomical, inefficient, or unavailable” (NYSED, 2011). The creation of BOCES was to be a temporary measure, on the way to the creation of larger “intermediate” school districts. Legislation authorizing the creation of these intermediate districts was repealed, however, and the BOCES became a well-established New York State institution to facilitate collaboration in education. There are now thirty-seven BOCES serving all but nine of New York State’s school districts.⁶

BOCES has been an important resource here in Ulster County. We’ve written before about the sharing that happens among school districts through Ulster BOCES: cooperative purchasing, operational support and management services, including technology services and support, data management, financial management, and food services management, to name a few. And school districts also engage together, through Ulster BOCES, to deliver educational programming; career and technical coursework in aviation, fashion design and merchandising, cosmetology, computer design, health sciences, information technology, and culinary arts, as well as pre-university programs in robotics and engineering, audio engineering and music sound production, media game and design, and education, again, to name a few. Hudson Valley Pathways Academy (PTECH) serves at-risk students from across Ulster—and neighboring—counties. Together, these BOCES programs offer remarkable opportunities for Ulster County students that each district is unlikely to be able to offer on its own.

² Hartford Public Schools, <http://www.hartfordschools.org/enroll/school-directory-2/school-categories/schools/middle-high-schools/>. Interestingly, a BOCES-type organization, called the Capital Region Education Council operates several magnet schools that are available to students in 36 proximate school districts. <http://www.crec.org/about/index.php>

³ Some of these are Special Act districts, which enroll very few students, often with special needs. <https://data.nysed.gov/>

⁴ Jacobowitz, Robin (2014), Public Education in Ulster County: Finding the Right Scale (CRREO Discussion Brief 12, Spring 2014). New Paltz, NY: State University of New York at New Paltz Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach.

⁵ New York State’s “Big Five” school districts—New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Yonkers, and Syracuse—are not eligible to participate with BOCES.

⁶ <http://www.boces.org/AboutBOCES/WhatisaBOCES.aspx>



One way that we might approach sharing educational programming in Ulster County is to create a quasi-magnet high school system at the high school level.

But we can do more. Much can be achieved countywide if we think differently—if we think bigger—about the possibilities.⁷ BOCES can provide a mechanism for achieving this. By working together, districts can provide opportunities that they might not be able to provide on their own to allow us an even greater range of opportunities to Ulster County youth. This is the next step toward actualizing the core mission of BOCES. And it is the next step in enhancing educational opportunity for our students.

A Model for Ulster County

One way that we might approach sharing educational programming in Ulster County is to create a quasi-magnet high school system at the high school level. In conventional magnet high schools, like those in Hartford, Connecticut, students attend a specialized school of their choice for their entire high school career. Under a quasi-system, students would complete core academic requirements in their home district, and then be allowed to enroll in specialized courses at another high school in the county if they choose to do so. The program could work something like this:

- High schools within Ulster County would develop a specialization: STEM, arts, humanities (including world languages), business, fine and performing arts, agricultural science, for example.
- Lower division students (typically 9th and 10th grades) would complete core academic coursework required for graduation in their home district.
- Upper division students (typically 11th and 12th grades) would have the opportunity to

take specialized coursework at the high school focused upon their interest. This, of course, would not preclude students from remaining in their home district to take specialized courses offered there or to take a course of general studies, if they prefer.

- Students would receive a diploma from their home district.
- Students would participate in sports in their home district.

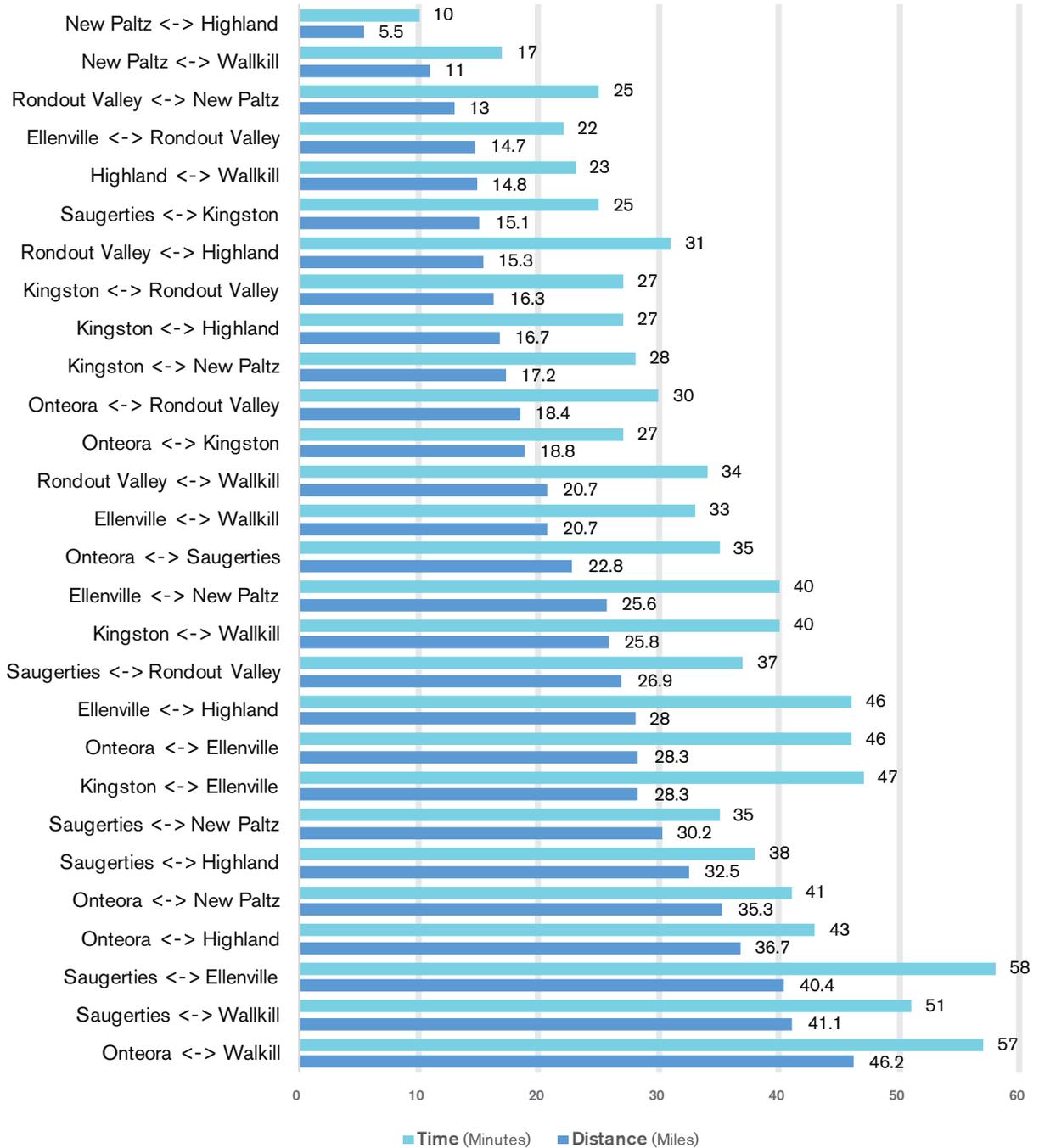
Of course, such a plan raises a number of logistical issues.

Travel and transportation: *Chart 1* shows the distance and estimated travel time (without stops) between all of the high schools in Ulster County. Going from one end of the county to another would be time consuming; for example, travel between Saugerties Central School District and Ellenville Central School District would be just under one hour. Clearly this would not be the best use of student time or transportation resources.

One way to address this would be to divide the county in half—either east/west or north/south—and have the same specializations available in each. Students in the western part of the county would choose from among the schools in the western area; students in the east would choose from among schools in the east. An east-west configuration could group the Ellenville, Onteora, Rondout Valley, and Wallkill school districts into a western Ulster group, and the Kingston, Highland, New Paltz, and Saugerties school districts into an eastern Ulster group. There are still some long travel times with this configuration, particularly in the western group. As *Table 1* shows, it will take close to an

⁷ Student enrollment across Ulster County is 20,637, with 7,207 students in grades 9–12; this is more than in Hartford, Connecticut, mentioned earlier. <https://data.nysed.gov/reportcard.php?county=62&year=2016&createreport=1&enrollment=1>

CHART 1: East-west configuration, driving time among high schools (without stops)



hour to transport students between Onteora High School and Wallkill High School and just over 45 minutes to transport students between Ellenville High School and Onteora High School. The eastern configuration has shorter travel times, with the longest being 38 minutes between Saugerties and Highland. A north-south configuration, shown in *Table 2*, shows shorter travel

times overall. This model groups the school districts of Onteora, Saugerties, Kingston, and Rondout Valley in a northern group and school districts of Ellenville, New Paltz, Highland, and Wallkill in a southern group. In this configuration, Ellenville students would bear the largest travel burden, with trips from Ellenville to all

TABLE 1: East-west configuration, driving time among high schools (without stops)

WESTERN ULSTER	Nearest high schools (minutes, travel time 30 minutes or shorter)	Farthest high schools (minutes; travel time longer than 30 minutes)
ELLENVILLE HIGH SCHOOL	Rondout Valley High School (22)	Onteora High School (46) Wallkill High School (33)
ONTEORA HIGH SCHOOL*	Rondout Valley High School (30)	Wallkill High School (57) Ellenville High School (46)
RONDOUT VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL	Onteora High School (30) Ellenville High School (22)	Wallkill High School (34)
WALLKILL HIGH SCHOOL		Onteora High School (57) Rondout Valley High School (34) Ellenville High School (33)
EASTERN ULSTER	Nearest high schools (minutes, travel time 30 minutes or shorter)	Farthest high schools (minutes; travel time longer than 30 minutes)
HIGHLAND HIGH SCHOOL	Kingston High School (27) New Paltz High School (10)	Saugerties High School (38)
KINGSTON HIGH SCHOOL	Saugerties High School (25) Highland High School (27) New Paltz High School (28)	
NEW PALTZ HIGH SCHOOL	Kingston High School (28) Highland High School (10)	Saugerties High School (35)
SAUGERTIES HIGH SCHOOL	Kingston High School (25)	Highland High School (38) New Paltz High School (35)

* Onteora and Wallkill students are burdened with travel in this configuration. We experimented with including with each in the eastern group of schools. Travel times are better, but still long. Travel between Onteora High School and: Kingston High School (27 minutes), Saugerties High School (35 minutes), Highland High School (43 minutes). Travel between Wallkill High School and: Saugerties High School (51 minutes), Kingston High School (40 minutes), Highland High School (23 minutes), New Paltz High School (17 minutes).

TABLE 2: North-south configuration, driving time among high schools (without stops)

NORTHERN ULSTER		
	Nearest high schools (minutes, travel time 30 minutes or shorter)	Farthest high schools (minutes; travel time longer than 30 minutes)
KINGSTON HIGH SCHOOL	Saugerties High School (25) Rondout Valley High School (27) Onteora High School (27)	
ONTEORA HIGH SCHOOL	Kingston High School (27) Rondout Valley (30)	Saugerties High School (35)
RONDOUT VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL	Kingston High School (27) Onteora High School (30)	Saugerties High School (37)
SAUGERTIES HIGH SCHOOL	Kingston High School (25)	Rondout Valley High School (37) Onteora High School (35)
SOUTHERN ULSTER		
	Nearest high schools (minutes, travel time 30 minutes or shorter)	Farthest high schools (minutes; travel time longer than 30 minutes)
ELLENVILLE HIGH SCHOOL*		Highland High School (46) New Paltz High School (40) Walkkill High School (33)
HIGHLAND HIGH SCHOOL	New Paltz High School (10) Walkkill High School (23)	Ellenville High School (46)
NEW PALTZ HIGH SCHOOL	Highland High School (10) Walkkill High School (17)	Ellenville High School (40)
WALKKILL HIGH SCHOOL	New Paltz High School (17) Highland High School (23)	Ellenville High School (33)

* Ellenville students are burdened with travel in this configuration. We experimented with including it in the northern group of schools. While travel to one school – Rondout Valley High School – allows for one trip under 30 minutes (22 minutes), travel between the other high schools is actually longer. Ellenville High School to: Kingston High School (47 minutes), Onteora High School (46 minutes), Saugerties High School (58 minutes).

other high schools in the southern region taking longer than 30 minutes.

This quasi-magnet model in our largely rural county would allow districts to diversify their programming but it would also add expense, particularly in additional costs to transport students to other districts. This extra expense—over and above districts’ current costs for

transportation—must be factored into the decision process as districts consider establishing this quasi-magnet system. To assure greatest efficiency, transportation could be coordinated through Ulster BOCES, in a manner similar to the way students from all Ulster districts are currently transported to BOCES programming.

Other issues that require attention include:

Teachers: Staffing is a difficult and complicated issue. Districts would have to work within the bounds of their contracts and district policies to determine what kind of staffing arrangements are permissible in a quasi-magnet sharing arrangement. One possible approach would be to have the teachers employed through Ulster BOCES. In this scenario, school districts would join to hire a teacher through BOCES; they would share the cost of this teacher and also receive BOCES aid (approximately 60%) on the shared service, even further lowering the cost. This approach has limitations, however, namely that any teacher hired through this process and working in districts would then have a preferential claim to employment in those districts if, for some reason, the courses he/she taught were cancelled. This eligibility lasts for seven years. Another approach would be for school districts to enter into intermunicipal agreements to share the cost of the teacher. While this approach avoids contractual obligations of hiring through BOCES, the savings here are only in the shared cost of personnel.

Financing: Beyond the expense of staff, sharing would entail costs in materials and transportation. Districts could negotiate arrangements for a per-pupil figure that would cover the cost of materials (equipment to support a larger STEM or art program, for example). Expenses to cover space and maintenance would likely even out among districts, as all districts would likely be sending and receiving students. Transportation is complicated and depends on participating districts (and students), timing of courses, and local district schedules. A group of local district transportation officials would need to work together to determine the most effective and efficient way to execute this function.

Collaboration and local autonomy: Sharing educational programs involves considerations that are different from those associated with sharing administrative services. Districts must engage in joint decision making about curriculum, assessment, and instructional methods; this gets to the heart of local control over education. Also in a sharing situation, districts may have to reconcile different philosophical approaches to teaching and learning.

Other Considerations

Student population: The development of magnet programs is sometimes resisted because districts fear losing their brightest students and there is concern about the impact of this loss on the students who are “left behind.” However, in this proposed model, specialization would be designed to serve all interested students, not just advanced students. Additionally, it is possible to develop a model in which students attend the specialized program for just a half day as opposed to a full day.

Advanced placement courses: Scheduling of Advanced Placement courses would have to be considered. These classes might be offered either at the home districts (especially if the model is a half day) or within the specialized program. It is likely that this will vary by district, depending on specialization and the demand for certain classes in each district.

Scheduling and calendar: Districts would have to decide which calendar and school schedule to follow (these differ from district to district).⁸ Alternatively, districts could come together to create a schedule and calendar that would apply to all Ulster County school districts. BOCES could help manage many of these issues, or they could be addressed within districts themselves.

Finally, districts must weigh costs and benefits of a quasi-magnet model. Where service sharing is often promoted as a mechanism for creating savings and efficiencies, shared educational programming can sometimes increase costs. It costs money to transport students longer distances, across district boundaries, or to arrange for transportation to a second location in the middle of the day to attend classes in another district. And there may be expenses associated with upgrading technology—or purchasing more technology—to allow for online learning. Moreover, such a system may even increase staff and associated costs; after all, it costs more to pay even the partial salary of a teacher than not to pay that teacher—or offer that class—at all.

But there are also opportunities for saving in this model, from sharing an under-enrolled class that a district might have run anyway, or from having students attend class

⁸ Shaughnessy, James (2014), *Bell Schedules and Calendars*. (A 2020 Vision for Public Education in Ulster County, November, 2014). New Paltz, NY: State University of New York at New Paltz Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach.



And very importantly, a quasi-magnet approach would permit school districts to retain their local identity so essential to our communities, while also expanding educational opportunity for

on-line. Decisions about educational program sharing must involve balancing the costs of programming against the benefits of offering greater opportunity for students.

Moving Forward with Sharing Educational Programming in Ulster County

A quasi-magnet approach to high school in Ulster County could enable school districts to develop and nurture deep expertise in a specific academic specialization, leverage their collective resources in the development of that expertise, and allow for a broad range of courses and opportunities for Ulster County students. Moreover, a magnet program does not preclude the use of additional sharing mechanisms—distance learning, for example—that can be integrated into the course work of most specializations. And very importantly, a quasi-magnet approach would permit school districts to retain their local identity so essential to our communities, while also expanding educational opportunity for students in the final stages of their secondary education.

We should not underestimate the potential—or the challenges—of the quasi-magnet approach. It is a big idea that would require deliberation and planning on many fronts. But it also is not necessary to begin with such a heavy lift; we can approach educational program sharing incrementally, with the objective of determining whether such a quasi-magnet model will best meet the needs of our students as the education landscape and the labor market continue to change. In this approach, it may make more sense for two or three districts to share just a few courses as a first step. Once the logistics of this arrangement have been worked out and, most importantly, the educational benefits of this arrangement made clear, other school districts could join or form their

own collaborations. While this incremental approach may be a more feasible place to begin, we must be careful not to lose sight of the potential of a larger sharing initiative that involves all Ulster County school districts in a systemic approach to enhanced educational offerings through program sharing.

The fundamental rationale for increased sharing of educational programming—enhanced educational opportunity for our children—is compelling. As the 21st century advances, changing circumstances challenge us to change too if we are to grow and prosper. Ulster County school districts already do a lot together. We can and should do even more.

OTHER MODELS OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM SHARING

GRADE SHARING

Grade sharing, the practice of sharing an entire grade-level of students between two or more school districts, was developed in Iowa and Wisconsin as a mechanism for dealing with declining enrollments and declining revenues. This model allows school districts to share education services—and thus offer quality education for their students—while maintaining their status as a distinct legal entity (Iowa Code 282.10). There are several forms of grade sharing:

- In a one-way sharing arrangement, one school district sends students in one, or multiple, grades to another school district for instruction but does not receive any students in return.
- In a two-way sharing arrangement, both school districts send some students to be educated in the other district. For example, middle school students from school districts A & B may attend school in district A, while high school students from school districts A & B attend school in district B.⁹

Grade sharing is authorized through state legislation, which permits the sharing of students—and funding—across school district boundaries. This legislation dictates some elements of the sharing arrangements,

such as which institution will grant diplomas and how students will participate in athletics. School districts are left to negotiate other details with their sharing partner: the duration of each sharing agreement, transportation arrangements, and the nature of sharing schedules (school calendar, school day), for example.¹⁰ The state legislature in Iowa passed legislation to support grade sharing in 1983; now more than 70 school districts participate in some form of grade-sharing arrangement (out of a total of 333 school districts).¹¹ Grade sharing legislation passed through the Wisconsin legislature in 2015. These are the only two states, currently, that have this legislation.

Funding arrangements to support grade sharing vary. In Wisconsin, funding follows the student; the sending district gives the receiving district an established per-pupil amount for each student. In Iowa, the flow of funding depends on the grade sharing model; in a one way sharing agreement, the sending district supports each student with at least half of the per pupil cost. In a two way sharing agreement, tuition is determined by mutual agreement between cooperating districts.¹² Likewise, transportation arrangements are negotiated among or between sharing districts, though often the cost is borne by the sending district.

REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICE CENTERS, CONNECTICUT

Regional Education Service Centers (RESC) serve school districts in Connecticut much in the way that BOCES serve school districts in New York. RESCs are public education agencies that facilitate collaboration among districts within a particular geographic region, with the goal of providing effective services at efficient costs. RESCs were authorized through state legislation in the 1970s, with the express purpose of promoting “cooperative action to furnish programs and services” (Connecticut General Statute 10-66 a-n).

There are six RESCs in Connecticut that coordinate services and collaboration among component districts. RESCs are funded through the purchase of services by component districts as well as through competitive public grants. Operational services include cooperative purchasing, regional transportation initiatives, insurance consortium, custodial services and food

services, to name a few. Educational services include professional development, special education, and distance learning.

The six RESCs also operate 33 magnet schools. These are public schools of choice, open to all students residing within the districts that are members of the RESC. For example, in northeastern Connecticut, students have the option of attending the two magnet schools operated by the EASTCONN RESC; in north central Connecticut, students can choose from among the nineteen magnet schools operated by the Capital Region Education Council RESC. Most magnet schools operated by RESCs serve secondary students, though some serve primary grades. All are specialized, offering instruction in the arts, social justice, STEM, and early college high school.

Students are admitted to RESC magnet schools through a lottery, except for schools that focus on the arts and require a portfolio or audition as requisite to acceptance. The schools are funded through a combination of local (sending district) and state funds; they are tuition-free to students. Teachers are employed by the RESC.

Transportation is provided by the RESC in urban areas, where students are bused from a common location (as opposed to being picked up near their home). In more rural areas, transportation is provided by the sending school district.

⁹ https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/Reorg%20Guide%202014_0.pdf, p. 9); (PAGE 1 <https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/WGS%20Handbook%202015-16.pdf>); (see also Carlson, 2015)

¹⁰ <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/118/50?view=section>.
<https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/WGS%20Handbook%202015-16.pdf>

¹¹ Iowa Association of School Board, Visualizing Data, Districts Participating in Whole Grade Sharing Arrangement, http://www.ia-sb.org/Main/Downloads/Finance/VisualizingData/V_D_Oct30_memo_Sharing_WGS.pdf; Reorganization and Dissolution Actions since 1956-66, https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/District%20Reorganization%20History_0.pdf

¹² <https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/WGS%20Handbook%202015-16.pdf>), pg 4.
https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/Reorg%20Guide%202014_0.pdf), pg 77.

Author Biography

Dr. Charles V. Khoury is the District Superintendent/CEO of Ulster BOCES, providing services to the eight school districts of Ulster County. Dr. Khoury has held this position for over six years. As District Superintendent, he is the NYS Commissioner of Education's representative to the county. He oversees a budget of approximately \$70 million.

Dr. Khoury is completing his 43rd year in public education. During his long career, he has served as a high school social studies teacher, a guidance counselor, a Director of Guidance and Child Study teams, a high school principal, an assistant superintendent and as a superintendent of schools in both NJ and NY. He has also served as an adjunct professor of Educational Leadership in the graduate programs at Rutgers University, Montclair State University and at SUNY New Paltz.

Dr. Khoury holds a B.A. in Social Studies from Wagner College, an M.A in Student Personnel Services from Montclair State University and an Ed.D. in Educational Theory, Policy and Administration from the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. He is viewed by his colleagues as a thoughtful, articulate, innovative student centered educational leader, whose focus is always on improving student learning.

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