

Could Sweeney's plan for consolidation increase school board candidacy?

Claire Lowe

New Jersey is known for many things, among them the hundreds of cities, towns and boroughs that make up the most densely populated state in the nation.

But despite the nearly 9 million residents who live in the Garden State — and the \$15 billion in tax revenue that school districts collect each year — school boards struggle to find enough candidates.

“Volunteering is an essential part of community life, always has been in every way, from the people who volunteer as firefighters and EMTs, to serving on planning boards, and most importantly of all is to serve in the school district,” said Weymouth Township school board member Henry Goldsmith.

Goldsmith said school board members serve a dual role.

“Schools take an enormous portion of the local tax burden in every community, and the school board is responsible for making sure that the costs are controlled and that the residents receive the best possible value for their money,” he said.

Could a plan unveiled last summer by state Senate President Steve Sweeney to consolidate a third of the state’s 590 school districts into K-12 districts help increase participation? Experts believe it could, even though that isn’t the intended consequence.

Last summer, Sweeney unveiled his Path To Progress plan, which he said will help bring New Jersey out of fiscal turmoil and included a recommendation to consolidate school districts.

Statewide, more than 270 districts would be eliminated under Sweeney’s plan. In South Jersey, almost 80% of the school districts would be affected.

At a recent town hall event in Atlantic City, Sweeney said his plan wasn’t to close buildings but to create economies of scale, fewer administrators and streamlined curriculum.

Brigid Callahan Harrison, professor of political science and law at Montclair State University, said consolidated school districts will not create any large-scale changes in the operation of schools but will cut down administrative costs and create a larger number of involved constituents in local school boards.

“It would seem to me that with fewer school boards, just the fact that there would be fewer slots would mean that those seats may be increasingly contested or at least filled because you’re drawing from a greater constituency who are interested in K-12 education,” Harrison said.

The lack of candidates has been a consistent trend over the years, with the New Jersey School Boards Association reporting about 1.5 candidates per open seat over the past two decades.

“We are concerned about the low rate of school board candidacy,” said Frank Belluscio, spokesman for the NJSBA.

Belluscio said the NJSBA would prefer a September deadline for candidates instead of the end of July.

Somers Point school board President Staci DiMattia-Endicott said she isn't sure whether it was the filing deadline or a lack of information that caused no candidates to file petitions to run for the five open seats on the school board there last summer. She said it was an anomaly for Somers Point, where the average family spends 7% of its income on school taxes.

In the end, several candidates launched write-in campaigns to fill the open positions.

Somers Point's situation was unusual, but not unheard of. Last November, in The Press of Atlantic City coverage area, 21 of the 82 school board races were contested. In 17 of the area races, there weren't enough candidates for the number of open seats.

Harrison said it's not uncommon for school board elections throughout the country to be uncontested, with the exception of major cities or places where curricular issues or union negotiations have been politicized.

People may not have an interest in running for school boards because they do not understand the important work school board members do, DiMattia-Endicott said.

“I think school board members, regardless of what district, work very hard, have a number of different challenges that they face. There's lots of work that's getting done,” she said of the volunteers, who do not receive compensation.

The stakes are high, too. School district budgets can reach into the hundreds of millions of dollars. This year, taxpayers funded nearly \$15 billion of the cost of education through property taxes, and the state spent an additional \$15 billion on education.

Michael Hayes, assistant professor of public policy at Rutgers University–Camden, agreed that Sweeney's plan would increase school board participation, in theory. Hayes, who grew up in Maryland, noted there is much more competition for school boards in his home state, where school districts are split by county lines.

He said New Jersey residents' love of home rule is simply out of habit.

“Even if it makes fiscal sense, even if consolidation would actually save them money, people actually prefer status quo,” Hayes said. “And that status quo is we have nearly 600 school districts in New Jersey.”

Hayes said that, just by looking at the impact of the school funding reform law, federal tax code changes capping property-tax deductions and an outmigration of residents, the state is heading toward consolidation.

“For New Jersey, it needs to be at least on the table. The state has so many fiscal challenges ahead of it,” he said. “It's going to be really interesting to see how it's going to play out.”