

Why is a merger of the three school systems in Catawba County being considered?

Sustained long-term student enrollment declines in both Newton-Conover City Schools and Hickory City Schools have led to significant under-utilization in current school facilities. As a result, both districts are expected to continue losing state funding at a concerning rate regarding maintaining existing student services. At the same time, increasing student enrollment in Catawba County Schools has caused a demand for more school classroom capacity, both now and over the long-term. To address the Hickory and Newton-Conover City Schools' recurring operating budget issues and to harness taxpayer savings realized through Catawba County Schools' facility construction cost avoidance, the Catawba County Board of Commissioners is evaluating the possibility of merging the three systems.

Is saving money the main reason the County is considering a merger?

A merger is being considered to stabilize two systems with decline in Hickory and Newton-Conover City Schools: a detrimental impact on student classroom instruction and associated support services. It will also result in significant one-time savings associated with future capital cost avoidance.

What are the primary benefits of a merger?

A merger would insulate students from service reductions associated with continued enrollment declines. It would also bring greater balance to the instructional and extra-curricular options available to K-12 public school students county-wide by expanding students' opportunities across all schools.

Merger removes the constraining boundaries that exist between districts, resulting in one district with growing enrollment (which drives increased funding, and, therefore, increased programming) and the flexibility to use existing facilities and resources as needed to adapt to enrollment changes over time with the least long-term disruption to students and staff.

What would happen if the systems don't merge?

If school systems don't merge, state enroll merit-based operating funds will continue to be lost at both Hickory City Schools and Newton-Conover City Schools. This will result in continued cuts to school budgets and staff in those systems. Unless the enrollment trend reverses itself, eventually this will lead to the collapse of the systems experiencing enrollment decline.

Why is redistricting by moving the lines not being considered?

Redistricting is not something that can be done locally. The Board of Commissioners lacks authority to move district lines. The North Carolina General Assembly is the body with this authority, and "local matters are best handled locally." Redistricting offers a temporary partial fix, and the outcome cannot be guaranteed. It would also take significant time to get this solution implemented, and in the meantime Catawba County is spending significant resources on an annual basis to deploy mobile units that would not be needed in a merger. Redistricting does not allow the agility and flexibility needed in the face of an uncertain future; it hinders the County's ability to respond to future growth shifts.

Will any schools be closed as a result of this merger?

No schools are being considered for closure. Schools that are partially empty would gain more students to help alleviate overcrowding.

What will happen to the neighborhood feel of my child's school?

Because schools will likely not close, schools would be able to maintain school-based pride, culture, and traditions.

What would happen to school staff in a merger?

School system administration staff would be integrated into one team. A majority of school staff positions would remain unchanged, as all schools will continue to operate.

How would a merger impact student learning?

Filling partially empty classrooms to reduce overcrowding creates more balanced student-teacher ratios for all students. By reducing the risk for enrollment-based program cuts, a merger would improve Hickory City Schools' and Newton-Conover City Schools' staffing coverage for positions like admin support, Assistant Principals, and specials like art and music. A single system would equalize student access to special programs by opening them up countywide.

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What will happen to special programs (orchestra, AP Academy, Discovery, HCAM)?

Through merger, specific programs the community values could be preserved through addition of merger plan stipulations. These programs are at greater risk if schools continue to lose operational funding, because it would become increasingly difficult for schools to maintain the staff and resources needed for these programs.

How many students would have to relocate?

No specific decisions have been made that would determine exactly how many students would be relocated in a merger. However, a majority of student in all districts would remain in their same schools.

Even if a merger does not occur, some students will still need to be relocated within their existing school districts to maximize available classroom space.

Would students have longer bus routes?

Transportation distances for a large majority of students will not change. Students who would be relocated would be assigned to a school located near their current school. The commute could be longer or shorter depending on where students live, but not significantly so.

If the systems merge, what would they merge into? Who would be in charge?

The three systems would merge into an entirely new system, which would be governed by a newly constituted Board of Education. The Boards of Education for the three systems being merged would go away.

How does this issue impact taxpayers?

With a merger, the property tax increase needed to build school facilities would be lower. Without it, the tax increase would be higher. This is because without a merger, underutilized space in each of our systems is not accessible to address the needs in the other systems. A merger would fix this.

What is the merger process in North Carolina?

North Carolina general statutes allow for school district mergers to be initiated by either local boards of education or a county's board of commissioners, subject to approval by the State Board of Education. These mergers are governed by North Carolina G.S. 115C-67 and 115C-68.1.

Mergers initiated by a board of county commissioners must combine all districts in the county into a single county-wide district. Catawba County does not have the authority to merge two of the three districts.

The process currently being considered by Catawba County involves the Board of Commissioners initiating the merger by adopting a statutorily required merger plan after a required public hearing. The merger plan:

- Names the merged unit
- Sets an effective date of merger
- Establishes a board of education for new unit, including number of members, method of election or appointment, whether at-large or district-based, etc.
- Demonstrates ability to set a funding level at least equal to the highest of any of the three districts over the past five years.

If the Board of Commissioners were to formally adopts a resolution to merge all three districts based on the countywide merger plan, the written merger plan and adopted resolution would be submitted to the State Board of Education for approval.