

Sharing Services

Saving Money and Expanding Choice

by Clorinda Valenti

When the Wellsville School District in Allegany County became alarmed at the number of pregnant students dropping out of school, it created its award-winning "Crossroads" program to provide young women with a way to earn a local high school diploma and learn vital parenting skills.

Not that it had a very grand beginning. The district started operations in a local church annex and had to find volunteers to staff a day care program while the students were in class. Six other local districts in this Southern Tier area were impressed with Wellsville's efforts and soon became part of the Crossroads experiment.

This innovative twelve-year-old program, which Gov. Mario Cuomo honored this past December with an Eleanor Roosevelt Community Service Award, is but one example of how sharing services between and among school districts can benefit students while reducing educational costs.

The possibility of forced school district consolidation is a hot topic in New York State education circles these days, and those districts with experience in sharing services see this practice as a viable alternative to an unwelcome merger.

"Often in a small town, the school is all there is," said Wellsville Board Member Gordon Grantier. "When it's gone, it's gone." Grantier believes sharing services with other districts is the local answer to the threat of consolidation. "The alternatives [to consolidation] really haven't been looked at," he added.

Certainly his and neighboring districts have proven quite resourceful in finding new areas and ideas for cooperation. Wellsville joined with the Andover, Scio and Whitesville districts to form the Seekers Program, through which students can register for classes in another district school. So far, the program is in its developmental stages, but students have traveled from Whitesville to Wellsville to study with that district's art teacher, while students from Wellsville took advan-

tage of the opportunity to take an Advanced Placement computer mathematics course in Scio.

"The opportunities for students in small districts are limited," concedes Wellsville Supt. Keith Reester, "but this issue can be addressed by shared services." Grantier concurs and noted, "Choice is the educational buzzword these days and sharing services is a way to offer more choice to students."

The superintendents from these four districts, who have dubbed themselves the "Seekers" group, meet several times a month to discuss further possibilities for sharing services (current ideas involve the possibility of sharing a school business manager and a buildings and grounds supervisor). According to Andover Supt. Jacqueline Bellamy, this cooperative venture has created a positive climate and solid foundation for future programs and long-term relations among these districts.

In Bellamy's case, relationships forged in the Seekers group helped her avert a minor crisis. Last fall, a chlorine supplier refused to deliver to Andover the small amount the district needed, so Bellamy quickly got on the phone to Keith Reester in Wellsville and they agreed to combine purchases with a single shipment. As a result, both districts got the lowest available price along with local delivery.

"Anything we can do, we're willing to look at," said Reester in regard to this kind of collaboration. "Districts in this area don't get territorial about what's ours and what's theirs; the important question is what's good for the kids?"

Bellamy believes one advantage of having this history of cooperation with other districts is that collectively they will be more effective in making the necessary changes in education demanded by State Education Department (SED) programs such as the Compact for Learning, and the needs of business and new technologies. "We feel comfortable about going to each other for help," Bellamy said of her fellow Seekers. "We see ourselves as possessing more strength together than as individual districts, and we trust each other."

The matter of trust in a shared-services plan is an issue the Skaneateles and Marcellus districts are dealing with in planning for a shared bus garage. "Sharing services is a great alternative to consolidation,"

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Skaneateles Supt. Walter Sullivan said, "but it involves a trust factor and an element of risk."

Both central New York districts found themselves in need of a new bus garage maintenance facility but lacking the tremendous amount of money needed to build one. A new garage in Skaneateles, for example, carried a price tag of \$1.2 million; thus, the district began discussions with Marcellus, a neighboring district, about building a joint facility.

Sullivan and Marcellus Supt. Paul Bristol admit that certain aspects of the joint project are fraught with risks, such as the discussion to locate the bus garage in Marcellus (because of that district's higher state-aid building ratio), and the fact that Skaneateles contracts out its transportation services while Marcellus drivers are district employees. Yet, neither superintendent views these potential conflicts as insurmountable. "There's a feeling of connectedness between the districts," said Sullivan. "We're sports rivals, but there's also a lot of respect." Bristol sees the districts as "almost sister communities."

Using money from SED efficiency grants, the districts hired the **Transportation Advisory Services** consulting firm in Fairport, N.Y. to complete a cost-analysis study. If the plan proves cost effective for each district,

and it gets board and voter approval, then the garage may be constructed and ready for use in September of 1993, according to Sullivan.

"We [in education] can't keep doing business as before," Bristol said, speaking of his philosophy of sharing service. "We have to look for a new way to do things." Bristol suggests a district ask itself what are its needs, evaluate what it wants and seek out other districts to see if needs and resources are compatible. The bus garage, for example, is designed to hold more vehicles than are contained in the districts' fleets so that in the future the facility may accommodate the maintenance needs of smaller school districts. Such plans, said Bristol, result in cost savings and increased efficiency in delivering services.

"But there are varying degrees of risk involved in sharing services," Bristol added. He cited a program devised by a Marcellus music teacher to pool and share used sheet music with other districts as carrying much less risk, cost and administrative responsibility than a plan to build a new multimillion-dollar facility with another district.

School districts like these are proving that no matter how simple or ambitious the idea, sharing services may be the way districts can retain their independence while serving tomorrow's students. 