

Rethink the chaos of school districts in Wilmington

Education series: Joseph Pika and Henry Harper 1:31 p.m. EST December 16, 2015



(Photo: Supplied)

Editor's note: This week, The News Journal opinion pages are featuring a series of essays written by members of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission. Read the series at www.delawareonline.com/opinion. Submit your view to letters@delawareonline.com.

Seventeen independent entities currently deliver public education to 11,500 students within Wilmington's city limits. This includes four traditional school districts, one vocational-technical school district, and 12 charter schools. In this case, more is not merrier—nor is it coherent or effective in delivering results. Seldom do the traditional districts coordinate or even collaborate on curriculum decisions or instructional policies among themselves. Nor do the charter schools. Collaboration between charters and traditional districts is rare. The result is simple and sad: No one is accountable for the overall improvement of public education in Wilmington, and the children of Wilmington suffer, particularly low-income students and English language learners.

In each of the four traditional school districts, low-income Wilmington students score lower on the state's standardized tests in Math and English Language Arts than their low-income peers living in the county, and in most instances *substantially* lower. The same is true in most charter schools enrolling populations from city and county. This achievement gap has been invisible for years because the Wilmington student population is a minority of each district's enrollment and results are not disaggregated geographically. Wilmington students similarly lag in AP participation and graduation rates but lead in drop-out rate.



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The Wilmington Education Advisory Committee spent a year studying the problems of Wilmington education and developing solutions. It concluded that one of the principal problems is fragmentation of responsibility—a problem of governance. It proposed that two traditional districts, Christina and Colonial, leave the city, and that their students in the city become part of the Red Clay Consolidated School District. This consolidation of accountability would result in Red Clay serving more than half of the city's students, thereby reducing some, but not all, of the incoherence produced by having so many education providers in such a small space.

Beyond streamlining governance, the advisory committee called for expanded collaboration among the remaining districts and charter schools and creation of an overall plan for public education, a plan that would be the first of its kind in Delaware.

After spending nearly an additional half-year considering these ideas, the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission has recommended to the State Board of Education that the Red Clay/Christina consolidation proceed. After much deliberation and debate with Colonial School District, the Commission has agreed to evaluate the performance of the Wilmington students in Colonial and Brandywine, both of whom have reasserted their commitment to Wilmington students. It is worth noting that Colonial School District has no schools in the city and only 180 Wilmington students.

If the required state funding is approved, then detailed transition planning between Christina and Red Clay will begin next year and the actual change of district boundaries would begin with the 2018–19 school year. Christina and Red Clay administrative teams already have developed interim frameworks for how that transition might take place in a way that minimizes disruptions to students, parents, educators, and other school personnel.



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Much more needs to be done: design new programs; plan for repurposed facilities; ensure that several specialized programs now operating in Wilmington schools continue to serve all students who need them; and adjust transportation to meet shifting student enrollments. Additional time will ensure better outcomes for students and equitable adjustments for district employees. All students will have the right to remain in the schools and programs in which

they are enrolled at the time of redistricting and to remain enrolled through the completion of their programs of study at those schools. Employees will have job options and the opportunity to exercise choice at the earliest practical time during the transition.

There are no quick fixes for Wilmington's education problems, but there are solutions. These solutions must be pursued systematically in multiple steps taken over several years.

As two educators, who have made Delaware public education a central part of our work, no one has convinced us that the path of the last 60 years is sustainable, appropriate, or fair. To change that path, we need to act boldly and without equivocation.

Joseph Pika is a retired University of Delaware political science professor and the former president of the Delaware State Board of Education. Henry Harper is a retired educator and former Superintendent of the Appoquinimink School District. They are co-chairs of the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission's Redistricting Committee.

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