

# The Consolidation of Ypsilanti Public and Willow Run Community Schools

BY SCOTT A. MENZEL

## The Need to Consolidate

A quality public education system is the backbone of a strong and vibrant community. Ypsilanti historically had three school districts serving families: Ypsilanti Public, Willow Run Community, and Lincoln Consolidated. In November 2012, voters in Ypsilanti Public Schools and Willow Run Community Schools approved a consolidation proposal, with 61% of the voters in both communities supporting the effort. On July 1, 2013, the Ypsilanti Community School District was born. This essay is designed to provide a review of the historical context for that consequential decision along with recognizing some of the key people who made it possible.

The question of whether to consolidate school districts is never an easy one. While the Ypsilanti Public School District started in the mid-1800s, the Willow Run Community School District was a byproduct of the growth around the Willow Run bomber plant during World War II. Even then, discussions about a single district serving the region were considered.

In 1964, the Michigan Legislature passed Public Act 289: Reorganization of School Districts. Each intermediate school district was required to convene a committee on reorganization. Minutes from those meetings in Washtenaw County note conversations about creating a single district for the entire county, as well as the suggestion that Ypsilanti and Willow Run should be a single district. Notwithstanding conversations over the years regarding the advantages of being a single district, it wasn't until the aftermath of the great recession in 2008 that the struggles of the two districts led to a move from conversation to action.



Joint meeting of Ypsilanti and Willow Run school boards to place consolidation on the ballot, August 8, 2012. L-R: Laura Lisiski (Willow Run Superintendent), Scott Menzel (Washtenaw ISD Superintendent), Representative Bill Rogers (Brighton), Dedrick Martin (Ypsilanti Superintendent), and Representative David Rutledge (Ypsilanti).

### **Making It Happen**

In June 2011, the superintendents and board presidents of Ypsilanti Public and Willow Run Community Schools met with me, in my role as the incoming superintendent of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District, to discuss how the ISD could support the two districts, given they were both financially bankrupt and struggling with academic achievement. While the initial conversation focused on the potential of shared services, the nature of the challenges led to a recognition that no amount of combined services could erase the underlying structural challenges.

Each district was losing students, which further exacerbated funding challenges. The need to reduce programs and cut compensation for employees led to additional enrollment declines and an ongoing challenge related to attracting and retaining quality staff. This was referred to as the “death spiral” during community conversations regarding the need for a fresh start. The system of funding in Michigan (districts receiving funding on a per-pupil basis), combined with the expansion of school choice and charters, led to an environment where urban districts like Ypsilanti and Willow Run found themselves in a precarious position.

It took tremendous courage for the two school board presidents (David Bates of Ypsilanti and Don Garrett of Willow Run), along with the two superintendents (Dedrick Martin of Ypsilanti and Laura Lisinski of Willow Run), to engage in conver-

sations about consolidation. The topic often led to intense discussions throughout each community, given the storied past of both districts and the deep sense of pride and identity each community had related to its school district. At the same time, the reality was that endless cutting of budgets and programs was undermining the ability of each district to provide the quality education the students needed and deserved.

Absent the willingness of these leaders to engage in the crucial conversation related to consolidation, it is likely that Willow Run would have been dissolved as a district (a fate that Buena Vista and Inkster experienced shortly after the consolidation was approved) and that Ypsilanti would have been taken over by an emergency manager (as happened to several other deficit districts), and the citizens of Ypsilanti and Willow Run would have lost control of their public school system.

While courageous leadership was necessary for the consolidation effort to get off the ground, there were also policy considerations at the state level that were necessary for success. This is where the work of State Representatives David Rutledge (Ypsilanti) and Bill Rogers (Brighton, chair of the K–12 Appropriations Committee) became critically important. Representative Rutledge was a tireless advocate in Lansing for funding and policy changes that would help ensure that the new district had the supports necessary to succeed. This included helping to secure more than six million dollars in a consolidation grant and facilitating a restructuring of the operational debt into a manageable repayment plan that allowed the consolidated district to begin with a fresh start and not remain in deficit status.

## **A Decade Later**

Consolidations in Michigan are rare and typically involve small and rural districts. The consolidation of Ypsilanti and Willow Run was unique in scope and magnitude. Now, a decade after the voters approved the merger, Ypsilanti Community Schools continues to provide educational opportunities for the families in the community, and it has reversed the financial and academic decline that necessitated the consolidation vote. The willingness of key leaders to take on the difficult challenge, setting aside the potential impact on them personally and professionally, resulted in a school district merger that has weathered the test of time and validates the vision they had for improved learning opportunities for students in Ypsilanti.

## **A Note on Sources**

This essay is drawn from Scott A. Menzel’s dissertation, “The Consolidation of Ypsilanti Public and Willow Run Community Schools: Lessons Learned and Policy Considerations,” which was submitted for his Ph.D. in Leadership and Counseling, which he received from Eastern Michigan University in 2016. The image is provided by the author.

### **About the Author**

Scott A. Menzel, Ph.D., was the superintendent of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District from 2011 to 2020. During this time, he had the honor of being an active participant in supporting the consolidation efforts. He was also honored to serve as the first superintendent of the newly consolidated district from July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014.