



Morris Township-Morris Plains Patch

EduNation: A Patch Report on Our Schools

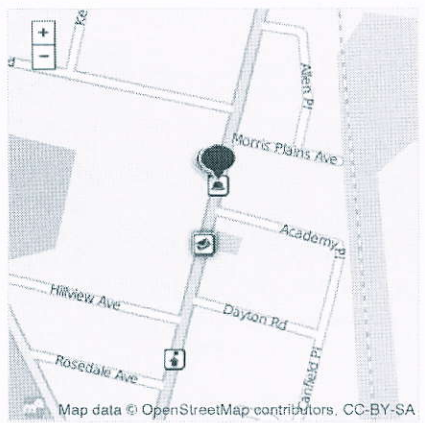
NEWS

Educators: Morris Plains District is Small, But Community Makes It Work

Volunteers, community cooperation are key to success, officials say.

Back in the days when the little red schoolhouse was the norm, some towns required parents to chop, split and deliver a specific amount of firewood for each enrolled child.

While the parents of Morris Plains probably won't be hauling logs to the Mountain Way (<http://morris.patch.com/listings/morris-plains-school-district>) or Borough School (<http://morris.patch.com/listings/morris-plains-school-district>) parking lots anytime soon, some locals say that running a small but successful school district really does, as the saying goes, take a village.



"A key reason that we are able to be successful as a small district is because of the sense of community here," Morris Plains school board member Lee Lusardi said of the district. "People are very generous with their time and talents to help the district in these tight financial times. They don't want to complain and bemoan. They want to do what they can to help give our students an excellent education."

School board president Dennis Reilly agreed.

"We only have one superintendent and two principals, so parent volunteers are huge," he said. "We have a community that just likes to contribute to the well-being of the town."

This fall, when the school district needed a sound amplifier, a local resident stepped up and donated one. Twenty IBM Think Pad Laptops were coaxed from a large corporation by one of the teachers. A parent entered a Samsung essay contest (http://www.fourseasonsofhope.com/us/4seasons_hope/education.jsp) determined to bring more technology to the schools—and came away with \$50,000 in equipment.

"Anytime you have parents involved in helping the school it gives the students and staff a feeling of support and sends a message to the students that education is important," Superintendent of Schools Dennis Mack said.

The district, which has 640 students in pre-kindergarten through grade eight, (older kids feed into Morristown High School), has serious financial challenges. State funds to the district have been slashed so significantly that borough residents now shoulder 97 percent of the \$13.5 million operating budget.

"Last year, the state of N.J. took away \$800,000 in state aid and nearly all of our reserve funds—the cash cushion school districts keep in case of emergency," Lusardi said.

Still, according to Reilly, the district has not only weathered the challenges, but learned from them.

"A few years ago there appeared to be a movement toward eliminating K-8 districts," Reilly said. "The county was instructed by the state to come up with plans on how districts like Morris Plains would merge with K-12 districts."

Under the Uniform Shared Services and Consolidation Act of 2007, each county superintendent, now called an executive county superintendent, was required to develop consolidation proposals for K-6 and K-8 districts within their purview.

People in Morris Plains, Reilly said, were skeptical.

"We thought we were a well-functioning district and that our kids would lose something if they did that," Reilly said.

Reilly and other authorities in the school system point to, among other things, the Morris Plains' academic performance as evidence the school district is working well in its current state.

The state's latest School Report Card (<http://education.state.nj.us/rc/rc09/index.html>) shows that students in the Morris Plains School District (<http://morris.patch.com/listings/morris-plains-school-district>) scored better than the state average on every area of skills assessment for the 2008-2009 school year. (The state will release its next school report cards in early 2011, reflecting data through the 2009-10 school year.)

The highest numbers on the report for Morris Plains came in science, a subject where students are assessed in fourth and eighth grades:

Percent of students scoring "proficient" or "advanced" on state assessment tests on science	Morris Plains	State

Fourth Grade	98.2%	91.1%
Eighth Grade	100%	84.6%

Math scores were significantly higher than state averages:

Percent of students scoring "proficient" or "advanced" on state assessment tests on math	Morris Plains	State
Third Grade	92.8	75.4
Fourth Grade	95.6	71.8
Fifth Grade	95.5	77.6
Sixth Grade	94.4	71.2
Seventh Grade	93.2	66.8
Eighth Grade	95.6	71.8

Language arts results were mixed, but still higher than average in every case. Mack said a new curriculum and new books have since been put in place to bring these scores into line with the math and science results. He did not give hard numbers on any progress to date, but said, "Our numbers keep going in the right direction."

Percent of students scoring "proficient" or "advanced" on state assessment tests on language arts	Morris Plains	State
Third Grade	78.2	62.9
Fourth Grade	97.0	82.5
Fifth Grade	78.7	66.2
Sixth Grade	88.9	70.1
Seventh Grade	89.8	62.4
Eighth Grade	97.0	82.5

Both teacher and student attendance has remained high as well. At the Borough School, 98.6 percent of district teachers were in school on an average day in the 2008-2009 school year, and 98 percent were in attendance at Mountain Way; that's compared to 95.3 percent statewide. As for students, 97.1 percent were in class on an average day at the Borough School, and 95.9 were at Mountain Way; the state average was 94.6. Only 2.6 percent of Morris Plains faculty left or entered in the 2008-2009 school year, compared with 4 percent statewide—meaning Morris Plains had a more stable workforce than average.

"You're always hearing about what's wrong with education," Lusardi said. "Abuses of the system statewide should be exposed, but taxpayers should also be told when they are getting good value for their tax dollars. The story that's being missed is what's right with many public schools. The Morris Plains School District is an excellent example."

Caitlin Troughty went through the Morris Plains school system, graduating from Borough School in 1997.

"I loved growing up there," she said. "It was the same 40 or 50 kids going through the schools together. I felt that I was close with a lot of my teachers. You didn't get lost in the crowd."

Hoping to preserve the small-town, walk or bike-to-school environment, Lusardi said, the Morris Plains Board of Education decided to move quickly after consolidation discussions began.

"The board put out a call for concerned citizens to join us in a study." Twenty-four people signed up. The group's official name was a mouthful, the Board of Education Ad Hoc Regionalization Study Subcommittee, but its mission simple: to look at how mergers of this type had worked in other places and determine if it would be the right thing for Morris Plains.

The committee was headed by Laurie Fu, then a board of education member, now a member of the borough council.

"Everybody who asked to be on the committee was on it," Fu said. There were varying opinions. I think some people came in thinking regionalization would be a good idea. Our budgets were getting tighter and tighter and there was concern that we would be able to offer less and less to our kids. In the end, it wasn't clear that there would be any cost savings or any educational benefit to our children. I don't think anybody left feeling like it (regionalization) was what we wanted."

"We decided we wanted to stay K-8 but share more services," Fu said. "We did this on our own so we could decide what we wanted to do before we were told what to do."

The merger issue has since become a moot, or at least stalled point. Alan Guenther, Director of the Public Information Office for the New Jersey Department of Education, said, when asked about the department's current stand on K-8 districts in general, "The department is stressing the value of shared services—and regionalizations where they make sense." Asked who would determine when regionalization "makes sense," he said, "If the school board, the residents and the districts favor regionalization, then it makes sense."

Officials in Morris Plains say that, in any case, their research on regionalization had great benefit for the school district. The board of education took a hard look at itself, asked whether it could make the case for remaining a stand-alone district, and started to trim expenses, they said.

Unlike other districts that have been blindsided by the need for cutbacks, Morris Plains was better positioned to take them in stride, Lusardi said, because efforts toward shared services were already underway. For example:

- The school district gives the borough (<http://morris.patch.com/listings/morris-plains-borough-2>) access to school facilities for recreation programs and, in return, "the borough took over maintenance of the lawns and fields," Reilly said.
- The district time-shares the special education professionals of the Child Study Team with the Educational Services Commission.
- Bids for busing contracts are put out cooperatively with a number of other Morris County districts, resulting in lower rates than Morris Plains could negotiate on its own.
- The borough and the district buy their gasoline jointly and the borough does maintenance on school vehicles.
- "The district also participates in the Morris Essex Insurance Group, a worker's compensation pool, and the Morris County Media Services Commission," Lusardi said, "which enables us to borrow books, videos and other educational materials."

"We've been actively seeking efficiencies through shared services and judicious budget cuts for some time now," Reilly said. "Our administrative costs have gone down. There are 64 K-8 districts in New Jersey and we used to be one of the heavier ones."

The district cut its median administrative salary from \$120,000 in the 2007-2008 school year to \$108,675 in the 2008-2009 school year. The former number was \$17,181 above the state average, the latter is \$2,082 above the state average.

Mack said that his status as an interim superintendent has saved the district about \$150,000 in a year and a half.

"I worked 35 years, then retired. I was asked to come out of retirement for this position. I'm getting paid a lot less money than the typical superintendent and, because I already have my pension, I don't need them to pay for my health care and benefits," Mack said.

According to Lusardi, there are "no assistant superintendents, no deans, but two very hard-working full-time school office secretaries. As a small K-8, we get a lot done with few administrators, most of whom have dual roles."

And those "dual roles" aren't always typical. At a recent school board meeting, a discussion arose about dealing with storm conditions in the coming winter months. Attendees learned Mack, the district's highest-ranking official, will be getting up and doing some of the plowing around the schools himself.

Creativity and a willingness to think outside the box are crucial, Reilly said.

"We just opened ourselves up," he said. "We've tried to be fiscally lean while still providing our kids with a quality education. We've been working very hard at it over the last 4-5 years."

The latest figures from the state still show the district spending more than other New Jersey Schools do, on average, to educate each student. But the gap shrank in the 2006-07 through 2008-09 period that the state sites in its most recent report cards. And in 2008-09, for the first time during that three-year-span, the district's "comparative costs per pupil" (a measure that focuses mostly on classroom instructional costs and related services, but excludes tuition, transportation and other costs not as directly related to instruction) was lower than the state average.

From the latest school report cards for the district:

	2008-2009		2007-2008		2006-2007	
	District Budget	State Average	District Actual	State Average	District Actual	State Average
Total Classroom Instruction	\$7,278	\$8,020	\$8,093	\$7,584	\$7,538	\$7,214
Total Support Services	\$1,760	\$2,155	\$1,650	\$2,040	\$1,884	\$1,896
Total Administration Costs	\$1,524	\$1,387	\$1,812	\$1,349	\$1,564	\$1,298
Total Operations and Maintenance of Plant	\$2,727	\$1,668	\$2,239	\$1,594	\$1,897	\$1,499
Total Food Services Costs	\$0	\$21	\$0	\$32	\$0	\$27
Total Extracurricular Costs	\$206	\$250	\$237	\$227	\$212	\$216
TOTAL COMPARATIVE COST PER PUPIL	\$13,495	\$13,601	\$14,053	\$12,598	\$13,103	\$11,939
TOTAL COST PER PUPIL	\$16,485	\$15,168	\$16,655	\$14,832	\$15,600	\$14,273

Reilly said it's the effort of a full and involved community that's made advances possible.

"You look at the community, the parents are great, the kids are great," Reilly said. "We've only had one school budget overturned in the last 20-odd years, so we have a community that supports the schools. We don't have every single technological innovation out there, but I can't see why anyone would want to leave. What wouldn't you love about this district?"

Do you think a small school district really is best for Morris Plains? Tell us in the comments.

About this column: "EduNation: A Patch Report on Our Schools" is an ongoing series about how our school community is faring in tough economic times

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