

***Remarks concerning the annexation of the Maplewood-Colonie Common
School District to the North Colonie Central School District***

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen. My name is Jerome D. Steele and I am the Superintendent of the Maplewood-Colonie Common School District. I have served in this capacity for sixteen years. I would like to thank the Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness for the opportunity to give testimony today.

The Maplewood-Colonie Common School District is a K-8 district located in Albany County in the eastern corner of the Town of Colonie north of the City of Watervliet and south of the City of Cohoes. The school has an enrollment of 177 students. Our resident high school students attend Shaker High School, which is part of the North Colonie Central School District.



Maplewood School has a long tradition of academic excellence and the faculty is always willing to learn and implement new educational ideas and techniques. The School's Russian program is one of the finest elementary foreign language programs in the State of New York.

My remarks this afternoon will focus on the present study to merge the Maplewood-Colonie Common School District with the North Colonie Central School District. In order to give you a clear perspective on how we came to our present status of preparing for a statutory binding vote annexing Maplewood to North Colonie you must look backward several years to understand what brought us to this point in time.

The district has always had a concern about the diminishing resources available to sustain the operation of the Maplewood District. As a result of a 14% tax increase for the 2000-2001 school year, a strategic planning committee was formed by the district to look at the availability of additional tax base that might become available. We involved the Town of Colonie and the Albany-Colonie Chamber of Commerce in our planning to determine if there would be any future development within the boundaries of our school district. Unfortunately, this proved to be fruitless.

During this same period, the Town of Colonie was conducting a revaluation of all the property in the town. As a result, for the next three years we experienced single digit tax increases. However, in the 2005-2006 school year the district experienced a 24.76% tax increase.

Although our districts had previously discussed consolidation, a number of factors acted as a catalyst to begin a serious, constructive and respectful conversation with North Colonie. These factors included the decreasing full value assessment, diminishing fund balance, increasing costs, especially in health care and teacher's retirement and state aid which over time had flattened. By early 2006 the Board of Trustees and I believed that it was time to consider the annexation option.

Any type of consolidation brings with it many complex issues, including emotions. In the Maplewood case, we have several things in our favor which would make this transition easier. First, 95% of our resident students attend Shaker High School. So, we already have a connection with North Colonie. Secondly, over the years we have collaborated with North Colonie on all aspects of the junior high school curriculum to insure that our students were prepared for the transition to high school.

In May of 2006 we had our first formal set of discussions with North Colonie and we started looking at the benefits for considering this process. The financial incentives provided the catalyst that moved this process forward. Current law provides reorganization aid whereby the two districts would combine their operating aid multiplied by a factor of 40%. This incentive aid remains at the 40% level for the first five years of the merger and then is reduced by 4% each year thereafter. For North Colonie this represented approximately \$29 million dollars over a 14 year period. In addition to this aid, North Colonie would also benefit from an increase in building aid during the first ten years of the merger. Their building aid ratio would be increased from .48 state share to .68 state share for any future building or reconstruction. Obviously, the financial incentives were attractive and allowed the larger North Colonie District to consider looking at the smaller financially challenged Maplewood District.

Working closely with the State Education Department and the District Superintendent of the Capital Region BOCES, the process was outlined for us that involved a consultant who would facilitate a feasibility study that posed one question.

“Would instructional opportunity be enhanced for all students at a similar or reduced cost to taxpayers by combining the two districts?” With that question in mind the districts jointly convened a 26 member committee with 13 members from each community to study this question as facilitated by Mr. Dan Porter and Dr. Lee Peters of School Efficiency Services.

From November of 2006 through the end of January 2007, the Feasibility Study Committee conducted six meetings to discuss the following issues: Governance, Financial Projections, Personnel, Instructional Programming, Co-curricular offerings, Transportation and Food Service, Facilities, and Other matters of local concern identified by the committee. After reviewing all of the questions, the committee was asked by the facilitators if they had enough information to move the question to a non binding advisory vote. The committee voted 25 to 1 to move the question. The vote was scheduled for May 15, 2007, which was the same day for school district budget votes throughout New York State.

As the final report was being written by our consultants Mr. Porter and Dr. Peters during February and March, one of the most disconcerting things happened. We learned that Reorganization Incentive Aid was not in the Governor’s budget. Reorganization Building aid remained intact as is in current law. Obviously, this was of great concern to both of our districts, because without the reorganization aid, we were worried that the annexation process would fall apart. As a result, we contacted our local Assemblyman Robert Reilly and work with his staff to help restore this aid. Mr. Tom Rybaltowski, the Assistant Superintendent for Business for the North Colonie Central School District and I brought copies of our study and went to offices of Senators Bruno, Breslin, and Sanders; Assemblymen Silver, Canestrari, Reilly, Parment, Nolan, and Tedisco. We also brought a copy to Mr. John Reid, Assistant Secretary to Governor for Education. To say the least, the reorganization incentive aid was restored. This aid is not only important to the Maplewood-North Colonie process, but also for other districts throughout the state both now and in the future that may be in a similar situation.

With the aid restored, we conducted our vote on May 15th 2007. The advisory proposition passed in the North Colonie district by approximately 72 percent and in Maplewood by almost 88 percent. We are now moving forward to the statutory vote

which will probably take place the first week of October 2007 and if approved Maplewood will become part of North Colonie on July 1, 2008.

Thus far this process has been an exemplary model of citizens coming together to study a complex issue for the ultimate benefit of children and their educational experience. As the leader of the Maplewood District, I feel that I needed to create an atmosphere that was transparent for all to see. As the only administrator of the district, I am very close to all aspects of the operation of this school. I also have a vision that I would like this school to continue to be part of this community. As Maplewood School has been part of the Maplewood community for over 100 years. To give up control of one school district to another is not an easy decision to make. But, given the right environment for all voices to be heard is extremely important.

As we move forward to the statutory vote in October, we will continue to work closely with the Randy Ehrenberg, the Superintendent and the Board of Education of the North Colonie Central School District. Also, we will continue to keep our parents, citizens, faculty, and staff and most importantly our students informed about this continuing process. In the end, if the annexation is approved by the voters in both districts, it is my hope and expectation that it will be for the benefit of all our students.