

School consolidation decades in the making: A history

First in a series

BY DAVID S. CROSIER • STAFF WRITER

ALLEGHENY HIGHLANDS — A long, winding journey that began in the 1960s will soon culminate in a historic unification.

The road that led to the imminent consolidation of the Allegheny County and Covington school systems on Friday, July 1, though, has not been without its share of trials and obstacles.

It's proved to be a 55-year saga of behind-the-scenes discussions and political maneuvering, bitter feelings, and sometimes harsh negotiations that has featured a varied cast of characters, personalities, and motives.

But to completely understand the most recent round of consolidation efforts between Allegheny County and Covington's government and school officials, a closer look into the history of school consolidation and educational history in the Allegheny Highlands must be undertaken.

This series of articles will take a deep dive into the history of education in the Allegheny Highlands and how the upcoming merger finally came to fruition.

In this installment, we will examine the 1982 merger of the Allegheny County and Clifton Forge school systems; while later articles will focus on the history of education in the Allegheny Highlands and the most recent efforts that helped make the consolidation of local schools a reality.

Many of the facts, figures and history used in this series were a result of a study of doctoral dissertations written by Dr. Paul Linkenhoker and the late Dr. Mary Litts Burton — both former longtime Allegheny school system employees — along with notes and articles compiled during school and governmental consolidation discussions beginning in the early 2000s.

A case for merger

Presented in the spring of 1989, Burton's dissertation provides an in-depth look at the consolidation of the Allegheny County and then-city of Clifton Forge school systems, including a history of events — political and economic — that led to the 1982 merger and an analysis of events that followed.

From a period just after the Civil War until 1906, one school system operated in Allegheny County.

In 1906, Clifton Forge became a city of the first-class and established its own school system, which operated in conjunction with Allegheny County until it split altogether in 1917.

Two school systems existed until 1952, when Covington became a city of the second class and established its own school system, which operated jointly with Alleghany County until it formally split educational operations in 1958.

By the mid-1960s, though, sentiments began to be raised by some area school and governmental officials on the possibility of reestablishing working relationships and possible mergers with adjoining school districts.

The first effort to bring school consolidation to fruition came in 1967, following the retirement of long-time Covington superintendent Ray Beazley. With his retirement, members of the Covington School Board believed an opportunity existed on some level to create a shared school system with Alleghany County.

That year, Covington School Board member Leonard Switzer, on the direction of the school board, met with members of the Alleghany County School Board. His proposal was to have one superintendent serve both systems, with a possible future merger of both central offices.

Switzer's proposal was eventually declined by the Alleghany County School Board.

In 1970, when Walter Hodnett retired as the Alleghany County superintendent, Switzer met with the county school board to present his previous proposal.

Once again, the idea was nixed; this time because members of the Alleghany County School Board didn't feel support existed with a majority of the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors.

Neither time were members of Covington City Council notified nor approved of any school consolidation proposal.

In the fall of 1972, the Fifth Planning District contracted with the Division of Surveys and Field Services of George Peabody College for Teachers to conduct an independent study of all three school divisions and provide recommendations for improvement.

Work on the Peabody Study began in November 1972 and was completed in the spring of 1973.

The study recommended the merger of schools "because the three separate systems were too small to justify the staff and services needed to provide a quality educational program."

When the Peabody Study was released in 1973, the total population of the Allegheny Highlands was about 28,700. As of the most recent federal Census, the population is now estimated at 20,960.

The study targeted roughly \$2 million (\$12.8 million in 2022) in building construction and renovation savings should the systems consolidate and carried a strong recommendation that a merger should "only occur if the local governments were to also consolidate."

Following the study's release, a nine-member committee was formed to study the consolidation of all three school divisions.

The committee consisted of eight parents and one teacher and presented several recommendations, which included all local elementary schools remaining in place; Alleghany County High School being designated as a senior high school for grades 10-12; and Covington and Clifton Forge high schools being converted to junior high schools, all administered by one superintendent and one school board.

Despite those efforts, Alleghany County School Board members later told their counterparts in Covington that the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors was not willing to consolidate at that time.

A change in climate

The late 1970s brought a change of ideologies and a reconsideration of possible joint school system scenarios.

One change was the hiring of a new superintendent for the Alleghany County system.

Mark Pace became county superintendent in July 1977 and, nine months later, Covington School Board member Leonard Switzer approached Pace with another proposal for possible joint school services.

Switzer was asked by retiring Covington school superintendent James Laughlin to broach the topic of school consolidation again with Alleghany County, although no action was taken on the proposal.

At about the same time in Clifton Forge, controversy erupted between the Clifton Forge School Board and its school superintendent. Following a two-year legal battle between the two, Clifton Forge was left without a superintendent.

In July 1980, Marty Loughlin was hired as Clifton Forge's interim school superintendent with the express purpose of engineering either a two-way or three-way merger of the school systems.

Economic downturns severely affected Clifton Forge. A disastrous fire at the Hercules plant in Covington in June 1980 resulted in the loss of almost 700 jobs. Substantial layoffs at the construction of the Bath County Pumped Storage Station at Back Creek meant a loss of around 2,300 jobs. All that contributed to a 13 percent area-wide unemployment rate, cited by officials as indicators the city couldn't support a school system at an appropriate level.

While the economic forecast in Clifton Forge was a driver of its participation in school merger discussions, in Alleghany County, talk of Covington annexing county land was a significant stimulant in continuing consolidation talks.

County officials correctly theorized if a court battle with Covington over annexation were to happen – which it eventually did in 1984 – the county would be looked upon more favorably by the state Commission on Local Government if it showed it was making good faith efforts toward cooperation with the surrounding localities.

In 1980, as Clifton Forge and Alleghany County officials began meeting in earnest to begin work on a merger agreement, Covington City Council passed a resolution on Oct. 1, 1980, stating the city “would continue to operate its own educational system and that Covington would be willing to accept students from Alleghany County and Clifton Forge into city schools on a contractual basis.”

That same month, the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution to continue the study of possible school consolidation. Clifton Forge City Council passed a similar resolution the following week.

Consolidation of Alleghany County and Clifton Forge schools took another step forward on April 6, 1981, when both the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors and Clifton Forge City Council passed resolutions calling for “the consolidation of the communities’ school systems.”

A plan brought forward

Financial assistance was provided by the Virginia Secretary of Education’s office and two consultants were named to assist with the consolidation plan’s development.

As it was being drafted, it was discovered that the most difficult part of the agreement would be financial control over the consolidated school system. Future financial planning and operation of the merged system, it was found, would prove difficult as the fiscal control of the new system would continue to be maintained by two separate governmental entities.

Eventually, the new school system’s funding formula would be based on factors for each locality – the value of real estate; personal income; number of pupils from each jurisdiction; and a ratio of funding based on the prior year. Each of the factors were calculated to determine the funding percentage each locality would be required to provide.

The completed plan was presented to Clifton Forge City Manager Richard Flora and Alleghany County Administrator Randy Arno on Nov. 6, 1981.

The formal resolutions for the consolidation of the two systems were approved by both governing bodies in early December 1981. The resolutions requested the Virginia Board of Education approve the new school division’s merger date of July 1, 1982.

The march toward consolidation, though, was not without its detractors.

In January 1980, the Alleghany Taxpayers’ Association was formed to oppose tax increases by the Alleghany supervisors. On Feb. 16, 1982, the association presented supervisors with a petition of 1,840 signatures opposing the plan.

The association undertook a trip to Richmond that same month to visit then-Virginia Gov. Charles Robb to request a referendum on the consolidation initiative be required by the Virginia General Assembly before it could be implemented.

When group members arrived in Richmond, Robb refused to meet with them, instead sending his executive assistant for policy. The governor later wrote the group a letter stating it was too late in the General Assembly session to “take a bill to the legislature to call for a referendum on consolidation.”

The formal School Consolidation Agreement between Alleghany County and Clifton Forge was signed by both governing bodies and school boards on June 20, 1982.

Consolidation in execution

Consolidation of the Alleghany County and Clifton Forge school systems went into effect on July 1, 1982, with the merging of the two systems’ central offices, under the leadership of a single superintendent and a nine-member school board.

Five members of the new school board were appointed by Alleghany County — one to represent each of the five electoral districts; and four appointed at-large to represent Clifton Forge.

The first year of the newly consolidated school system was spent creating curriculum, establishing staff placement, ironing out transportation, food and other services and recommending school names, colors and mascots.

It was decided that all elementary schools would remain intact and operational for kindergarten through seventh grades; Clifton Forge High School would be converted into a middle school for eighth-grade students, and Alleghany High School would house students in grades 9-12.

The new Clifton Middle School was the first intermediate-level school established in the Allegheny Highlands.

As had been expected from the onset, teachers in both systems were concerned with the planned consolidation in 1983. Some worried they would be moved to a new school building; some worried whether they’d still have a job.

In Burton’s dissertation, she spoke of the fears teachers had. “Aside from the people who made the decision to consolidate,” she wrote, “those best positioned to support or undermine consolidation were the personnel in each school division. Many people were suffering from the insecurity of wondering what would happen to them and their jobs. Teachers from Clifton Forge felt that they would not have a job or that they would be ‘swallowed’ by the larger system or assigned with no regard for their preference. Groups of whispering people were often visible before school began for the day.”

New curriculum to be instituted was crafted by two separate curriculum committees, made up of teachers, patrons and area residents.

Initial warnings to area officials concerning potential budget issues between the two jurisdictions did come to fruition in 1988.

That year, Clifton Forge City Council announced to the school board and members of the Allegheny County Board of Supervisors that it would not be able to fund the entire portion of requested funds for the next year's budget, as established in the original funding formula.

Even though a new funding formula was eventually created, budgetary issues remained inescapable with the consolidated school system until 2001, when the residents of Clifton Forge voted to revert from city to town status, with the responsibility of funding and administering the Allegheny Highlands School System falling solely on the shoulders of Allegheny County leaders.

Editor's note: The next installment will focus on the history of education in the Allegheny Highlands and how mergers, separations and unifications have played a role.

Education, integration evolves in Allegheny, Bath schools

Second in a series

BY DAVID S. CROSIER • STAFF WRITER

ALLEGHENY HIGHLANDS — You'll never know where you're going if you don't know where you've been. There's no truer axiom than this as we continue to delve into the merger of the Allegheny County and Covington school systems.

But while immense in its breadth, complexities, and accomplishment, it wasn't the region's first school merger.

In Allegheny County's 200-year history, schools and school systems have formed, separated, and merged back again numerous times — from one division in the early 1900s, to three by the mid-1950s, and back to two in the early 1980s.

And Bath County hasn't been immune to the sting of school consolidation controversy. Although it took a far shorter period of time for Bath County school officials to accomplish — as opposed to the 55-year journey school consolidation took in the Allegheny Highlands — the 1970 merger of Millboro High School and Valley High School was not without its fair share of heartburn, as school officials met with resistance, dissention, and an eventual court case to decide the issue.

The result of that struggle is what we now know as Bath County High School.

In this week's second part of the series, we look at a history of education in the Allegheny Highlands and how it helped lay the groundwork for the creation of the new Allegheny Highlands School System.

Early education in the Highlands

Prior to the Civil War, education in rural areas was a slipshod assortment of small school sites, mostly consisting of a brief education for poorer children and private tutors hired by more affluent families. Those of poorer status felt it unnecessary to educate children who were most likely going to spend their lives working the family farm.

The inconsistency of education in the Highlands changed on two major fronts following the Civil War — the organization of formal school divisions, and the education of newly freed African Americans.

In order to be allowed to return to the Union following the Civil War, southern states had to meet certain requirements. One of those requirements was the formation of public schools for all children. In Virginia, the state constitution was changed in 1869 to reflect this new formal public-school initiative.

Public school mandates were not embraced with open arms in the South, though.

In his 1993 doctoral dissertation, Dr. Paul Linkenhoker wrote, "Southerners were skeptical of anything that was pushed by northern influence. Public schools would meet resistance from a populace that distrusted both government and its institutions."

Despite the freedom African Americans gained in the Civil War, Virginia school officials worried that if the federal government forced racial integration in schools, southern whites would "pull their children out of the schools and the public school system would be lost," Linkenhoker wrote.

A federal civil rights bill was eventually defeated in Congress and the South "embarked on a system of separating schooling for the races that would last almost a century," Linkenhoker added.

That separation would lead to segregated educational facilities in the Highlands and throughout the South until the 1960s and was reinforced by the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court "separate but equal" ruling in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case.

According to Linkenhoker, formal education in the region can be traced back to the fall of 1865, when "Alleghany High School," a school for older students in Covington, was founded by the Rev. William Hill.

At that time, schools were still, for the most part, treated as private institutions for the children of wealthier families.

Hill was later succeeded as school superintendent by Covington attorney Robert Parrish.

Parrish continued to be an active Covington attorney while serving as superintendent in Allegheny and Craig counties. There wouldn't be a full-time superintendent in the Highlands until 1878, when the Rev. James Rice, minister at what is now First Presbyterian Church in Covington, became the area's first exclusively appointed superintendent for Allegheny County.

He served as superintendent until 1880, when he was relieved of his duties as the church's minister. During his tenure, he worked to improve the conditions of the schools and the quality of teaching and used the pages of the local newspaper, *The Allegheny Tribune*, to forward the cause of education and as a communication tool to the area's teachers.

School governance, growth

From its conception, schools in Allegheny County were separated into three districts — the Boiling Springs District in the southern part of the county, the Covington District in the west, and the Clifton Forge District in the east.

Those serving on these boards were originally selected by the state Board of Education. Later appointments were made by the local School Trustee Electoral Board, which had as its members the commonwealth's attorney, the Allegheny County superintendent, and a registered voter citizen.

In addition, the then-town of Covington had its own school district that fell under the jurisdiction of Allegheny County, with appointments being made by the town council.

To offer a rural school setting that allowed children the ability to also work on their family's farm, small "neighborhood" schools were formed throughout Allegheny County.

By the 1920s, about 40 such schools had been established in almost every community. Most children would stop their schooling in these graded schools and go on to work on the farm, in the iron mines, or in one of the local factories. More fortunate students could go to high school in either Clifton Forge or Covington to complete their education.

Eventually, Allegheny County began constructing larger schools that could house both elementary and high school students. Those schools included Boiling Springs, Dunlap, Falling Spring and Central in Low Moor. Smaller schools were closed and consolidated, although some remained in operation until the 1950s.

During that time, in Covington, white students attended either the Covington Graded School or Covington High School, which first opened in 1912; while white students in Clifton Forge attended the Moody School and Robert E. Lee High School.

Robert E. Lee High School first opened on the western end of Clifton Forge in 1912, but only served a short period, as a new high school was built in Clifton Forge in 1928. The Robert E. Lee High School building continued to be used until 1940, when it was closed and demolished.

The county's small neighborhood schools would finally be phased out in 1964, when a new Allegheny County High School was constructed and opened in Valley Ridge. High schools in Boiling Springs, Dunlap, Falling Spring and Central were all consolidated into the new high school, with most of the original buildings converted into elementary schools.

Leading the way

Two prominent early educators — James Jeter and William Watson — helped create the foundation of education that is continuing to be built upon with the upcoming merger of the Allegheny County and Covington school systems.

James Jeter first came to Allegheny County in 1890 as a teacher and was later appointed principal of the Covington Graded School. He would be named superintendent of Allegheny County schools in 1909.

Known as “The Professor,” Jeter became, as Linkenhoker noted, “the dominant figure in education in Allegheny County during this period of time,” and “no other can claim a longer or stronger influence in the area's schools than Mr. Jeter.”

Jeter was the driving force behind building Covington's first high school. Plans began in 1910 to build a high school for older students enrolled in Covington Graded School. Construction began on the corner of Locust Street and Court Avenue on Sept. 12, 1911. Students began attending in 1912.

The building was used as a high school until 1939, when the current Covington High School on Lexington Avenue was completed. It was later used as offices for the city of Covington until its demolition in December 2001.

Jeter was also instrumental in the construction of a new graded school in 1918. Constructed directly across from Covington High School on Locust Street, the building was renamed the Jeter School in 1925 and used until the 1966 school year, when students were moved to the former Watson High School building on Pine Street, which was renamed Jeter-Watson Elementary School. Jeter School was demolished in August 1969.

Jeter continued to serve as the superintendent of the Allegheny County School System until 1933.

Segregation, education

As James Jeter was a predominant figure in the education of white students in the early 1900s, William Watson was an equally strong force in the education of African American students.

The earliest documented record of African American education in the Allegheny Highlands can be traced to 1879, when the first segregated school for African American students was created in the Falling Spring area by Stewart Lewis.

Although educational opportunities for African Americans following the Civil War was guaranteed, it wasn't necessarily readily available, as most southern states maintained segregated facilities and often disbursed educational funds disproportionately.

An increase in the African American population in Alleghany County was seen in the 1870s and 1880s, largely as a result of an increase in employment prospects at the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway in Clifton Forge and the growth of the region's iron-ore industry. That increase led to greater educational opportunities for African American children.

Most early African American school initiatives were driven by churches, and parents took a strong role in the development of schools and curriculums for their children.

Clifton Forge's first school for African American students was organized in the late 1880s and operated until 1902, when a five-room brick building was built on the east end of town. It was the first African American school in Clifton Forge to carry the "Jefferson" name.

It was replaced with a new seven-room building on the corner of Church and A streets in 1927 and became known as Jefferson High School.

Following the desegregation of schools in Clifton Forge in 1965, the building was converted into a desegregated elementary school. It closed following Clifton Forge's reversion to town status in 2001.

In Covington, the first recorded school for African American students was established by William Watson in 1880 in a private home on South Lexington Avenue.

In 1886, a two-room school was built on Lexington Avenue and, in 1908, a new building was constructed on Marion Avenue. That facility would be used for all grades until 1939, when a new building was constructed on Pine Street. The Marion Avenue site is the current location of Hytower Park.

Due to Watson's efforts in educating African American students, similar schools began to emerge throughout Alleghany and Bath counties — Mallow, Wrightstown, Longdale, the Valley area of Bath County, Falling Spring, Cliftdale and Callaghan.

Professor Jeter worked alongside Watson in helping establish these educational centers for African American students.

By the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, local leaders began to make use of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Works Progress Administration, which built schools, public buildings and parks around the country.

In 1937, as plans were created for a new Covington High School on Lexington Avenue, plans were also drafted for a new high school for African American students.

At the same time, Bath County officials realized the need for more adequate high school education opportunities for its own African American students and turned to Allegheny County. An agreement was reached between the two localities, where Bath County would close its individual segregated schools, with African American students enrolling in the new Watson High School.

The school that boasted William Watson's name continues to carry a proud legacy of rich education and strong athletics in the hearts of those who graduated as a "Hornet." Covington and Clifton Forge high schools battled annually for the "Little Brown Jug" — a longtime heated rivalry between Watson High School and Jefferson High School in Clifton Forge that carried its own tradition of securing bragging rights.

Although the 1954 Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* ruling overturned "separate but equal" educational delineations, it would take another decade for African American and white students to be integrated in local schools.

Clifton Forge schools integrated in 1965 and a complete integration of Covington schools followed in 1966.

With the integration of Watson High School and Covington High School in 1966, the Jeter School building on Locust Street was closed and students were moved to the former Watson High School building on Pine Street.

The facility was renamed the Jeter-Watson Elementary School, a tribute to two of the area's early leaders in the advancement of education.

Editor's note: The next installment in this series will focus on school and governmental consolidation efforts beginning in the 1980s, culminating with the current merging of the Allegheny County and Covington school systems.

School consolidation succeeds under new leaders **Third in a series**

BY DAVID S. CROSIER • STAFF WRITER

ALLEGHENY HIGHLANDS — The Oxford Dictionary defines the word consolidation as "the action or process of making something stronger or more solid."

Similarly, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "to make firm."

In the Allegheny Highlands, though, consolidation has taken on a different connotation.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the use of the word "consolidation" in any form became, in the minds of many, a call to arms, with opponents and supporters taking opposing sides across an ever-widening chasm of doubt, distrust and hard feelings.

In a 24-year period, three initiatives to consolidate the Allegheny County, Clifton Forge and Covington governments — in one configuration or another — were brought to the voters for consideration and defeated; while numerous joint committees, charged with finding common ground to consolidate schools, were formed, met, and eventually disbanded.

From 1973 until 2022, consolidation in the Allegheny Highlands became possibly the most studied and analyzed subject in Virginia history, with no fewer than 13 feasibility studies, doctoral dissertations, and Virginia Commission on Local Government reports created in an attempt to make sense of the complexities of the governmental and school merger debate. And while each analysis made strong cases for merger, long-held beliefs and strong sentimentalities prevented consolidation from becoming a reality until a new crop of leaders emerged in the last decade that helped bring the recent school merger initiative to fruition.

This final installment chronicles the more recent history of governmental and school consolidation efforts, focusing on those that began in 1983 and continuing until last week's merger of the Allegheny County and Covington school systems.

Consolidating governments

The first documented suggestion that local governments should merge came in the spring of 1973 with the release of the Peabody Study and its assertion that school consolidation should “only occur if the local governments were to also consolidate.”

The Peabody Study had been commissioned by the Fifth Planning District the year before to study the three school divisions that existed in the Highlands at the time — Allegheny County, Clifton Forge and Covington — and provide recommendations for improvement.

The Peabody Study laid the groundwork for the eventual merger of the Allegheny County and Clifton Forge school systems in 1982 — the first school consolidation proposal approved by the commonwealth in Virginia history.

In July 1983, after more than two years of failed negotiations among Allegheny County, Clifton Forge and Covington officials, the city of Covington filed a notice with the Commission on Local Governments of its intent to petition for annexing 3.7 square miles of Allegheny County territory.

Prior to that, Covington's last boundary adjustment occurred in 1953 — a year after it gained its second-class city status — when it annexed 3.4 square miles of county land.

Covington's annexation request failed in 1984 when the commission refused to recommend the proposal citing, in part, an increasingly older population and an overall population decline.

One of the stimuli spurring Allegheny County's school merger with Clifton Forge in 1982 was the anticipation that, should Covington attempt such an annexation, it would be looked more favorably upon by the commission for its previous good faith attempts to work cooperatively with surrounding jurisdictions.

Along with its denial of Covington’s annexation petition, though, the commission urged area leaders to “vigorously pursue increased collaboration and cooperation in the provision of public services. It is evident that there is a distinct need for increased governmental cooperation to derive maximum benefit from the area’s limited fiscal resources.”

Harold Atkinson, then-commission vice chairman, wrote in the final report, “The Allegheny Highlands issue is unique and it is my feeling that the area’s problems will never be solved until the four governments presently serving the area become one.”

In October 1983, Covington residents presented a petition to Covington City Council and the Allegheny County Circuit Court asking the city to create a consolidation agreement with Allegheny County and Clifton Forge.

When Covington City Council failed to act within the required year’s timeframe, the court appointed a citizens committee, which presented a consolidation proposal to the court on September 11, 1985, to create the city of Allegheny Highlands.

In its July 1986 report, the commission stated, “In this instance the Commission is confronted with a task never before, to our knowledge, undertaken by any state judicial or administrative body — namely, a critical review of a proposed governmental consolidation.”

Despite the commission endorsing the consolidation plan, the subsequent referendum failed at the ballot box in May 1987, with Allegheny County and Clifton Forge residents overwhelmingly supporting the initiative but failing in Covington. Had it passed, Allegheny County, Clifton Forge and Covington governments would have consolidated January 1, 1988, with school divisions consolidating on July 1, 1988.

A second attempt to consolidate governments came in December 1990, when Allegheny County and Clifton Forge filed a commission petition to establish the city of Allegheny. That attempt also met with failure when a majority of Allegheny County residents voted against the plan in 1991.

A decade later, in 2001, citing fiscal stress as its principal motivating factor, Clifton Forge residents voted to revert to a town, becoming only the second locality in the state to drop its city status.

A third governmental consolidation effort came in October 2008, when voters in Covington and Allegheny County again presented petitions to their governing bodies and the Allegheny County Circuit Court, requesting elected officials create an agreement to consolidate the two jurisdictions and submit a merger plan for referendum.

Following a year of confrontational meetings between representatives of the Allegheny County Board of Supervisors and Covington City Council — which failed to craft a consolidation agreement within the statutorily prescribed year it had to create a plan — Allegheny County Circuit Court Judge Bo Trumbo appointed a 10-person committee of local residents, which met

extensively until July 13, 2010, when it adopted a consolidation agreement that would have merged the city of Covington and Allegheny County into the city of Allegheny Highlands.

The measure was defeated in both Allegheny County and Covington when it went before voters in November 2011. If passed, the merger would have resulted in a population of about 22,000 residents and a combined land area of roughly 450 square miles.

In each of its consolidation reports — five reports in all — including its 1984 annexation decision, the commission consistently pointed to issues of fiscal stress and a shrinking population as reasons for merger being necessary.

By 2011, Covington had lost 5.4 percent of its population between 2000 and 2010 and suffered a 21.6 percent loss in jobs; Allegheny County, during that same timeframe, saw a 5.6 percent loss of population and a 15.7 percent job loss. In total, from 2010 through 2019, the Highlands saw an overall 7 percent decrease in population.

From 1983 through 2011, as governmental consolidation efforts continued — and failed — local school leaders occasionally returned to the topic of a possible school merger.

In 2009, Allegheny County and Covington school superintendents hired the firm of S. John Davis and Associates of Richmond to study the feasibility and advantages and disadvantages of a merged school system.

The study, which analyzed school enrollment figures from 1999 to 2008, showed that while both school systems had been able to maintain an overall stable number of pupils, outside factors, such as a decrease in area birth rates and forecasted changes in the economic and demographic profiles of the Highlands, would result in an eventual decline in student population into the following decade.

In the 2009 study, it was estimated a consolidated school system would have a total enrollment of between 3,500 and 3,600 students.

The new Allegheny Highlands school system that formed last week will have an estimated enrollment of 2,700 students.

That study, along with an independently funded report released by The Allegheny Foundation in 2008, cited reductions in executive, administrative, and central office costs if the school systems merged.

New faces, new ideologies

While historically belligerent, the climate of cooperation between Covington and Allegheny County improved in the early 2010s as new faces began appearing on governing bodies and school boards.

Some were younger professionals who had school-aged children in one of the two school systems; others were elected and appointed who didn't have generational ties to the region, didn't view the merger of the school systems as a loss of local identity, and brought new perspectives to the concept of increased collaboration between Alleghany County and Covington.

There were also some who had business ties in the Highlands and saw increased cooperation as a way to bolster their overall business interests, while providing better governmental and educational services to residents.

In the wake of the defeat of the governmental consolidation initiative in November 2011, several of those new leaders began looking at ways of creating increased avenues of cooperation with their neighboring localities.

By 2016, Alleghany County and the city of Covington had increased collaboration to encompass about 40 different areas, including law enforcement, economic development, fire and EMS, water and sewer, recreation and various social-service endeavors.

Out of that desire for increased collaboration, in late 2013, the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors and Covington City Council passed resolutions asking their respective school boards to once again begin talks of a possible school system merger.

Also driving the effort was a diminishing tax base in both localities and a desire to provide educational opportunities for students that might not have been possible if each continued to operate separate school divisions.

What made school merger discussions different in more recent cycles, as opposed to the governmental consolidation efforts that took place from 1987 through 2011, was that it didn't require a voter referendum.

School board members and elected officials could decide the future of the school divisions by exercising majority votes within their individual boards.

School board members began meeting in early 2014 to discuss merging again. This time, though, a new educational concept became part of the dialogue — project-based learning.

Although originally conceptualized in the late 1800s, project-based learning became popular in the 2000s as an alternative to standard teacher-led models of education historically used in classrooms. It is a concept of "learning by doing," where students learn core-curriculums through developing projects in a collaborative effort with other students.

As school merger talks continued in 2014, elected officials, school personnel and educational advocates traveled to Indiana in December 2014 to observe project-based learning in real time.

Despite making positive strides, the 2014 talks eventually broke down as veteran school board members on both sides of the table haggled over long-standing issues of board representation, salary equalization, and the local funding needed to finance a merged school system.

Discussions finally halted when the Alleghany County School Board voted in 2018 to table any further school merger meetings.

School consolidation talks wouldn't lie dormant for long. On Aug. 22, 2019, Alleghany County and Covington elected and school officials formed what became known as the Joint School Services Committee (JSSC), comprised of representatives of each of the governing bodies and both school boards.

Prior to the 2019 formation of the JSSC, merger talks faltered over discussion of local funding. With dwindling tax bases and stagnant revenues, the local governments were unsure how they would be able to adequately provide the up-front money needed in a merged school system, especially for equalizing teacher salaries.

Two factors, though, significantly aided the JSSC in overcoming the stumbling blocks — the support of State Del. Terry Austin and a 2014 report by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, which recommended the state discontinue using lower local composite indexes as an incentive to encourage school division consolidation.

Instead, the JLARC report recommended making direct payments to localities to assist with costs incurred during and after consolidation.

In 2019, using the JLARC recommendation, Austin assisted the JSSC in securing \$400,000 from the Virginia General Assembly to help create a consolidation plan and, in March 2021, obtain a four-year General Assembly commitment to help pay for the educational needs associated with the new system.

The Highlands received a commitment of \$1.2 million for the 2022-23 school year, with an additional \$600,000 for the following three years.

After a year of meetings between the JSSC and associated subcommittees — many held on Zoom during the pandemic — a formal consolidation plan was presented to the local school boards and governing bodies in September 2020.

On Sept. 9, 2020, the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors approved the plan by a 6-to-1 vote, with the Alleghany County School Board approving it 4-to-1. The next day, following a contentious and emotional public hearing at Covington High School's Curfman Hall, the Covington School Board and Covington City Council approved the plan in separate 3-to-2 votes.

An epic 53-year journey toward school consolidation had finally come a successful realization.

The following January, the Virginia Board of Education unanimously approved the formation of Allegheny Highlands Public Schools, with the administrative consolidation taking place July 1, 2022, and the student body merging for the 2023-24 school year.

It was the first school consolidation plan approved since 2014 and, at that time, only the third school consolidation in Virginia since the Allegheny County-Clifton Forge school merger in 1982.

The plan calls for all elementary schools to remain open; although in one of its final actions last week, the Covington School Board passed a resolution recommending the merger of Edgemont Primary School and Jeter-Watson Intermediate School, with the realigned elementary school to retain the Jeter-Watson name. Formal action on that recommendation is pending with the new Allegheny Highlands School Board.

The plan also established Allegheny High School as the new division's senior high school, with Covington High School becoming Covington Middle School.

In his February 2022 doctoral thesis, Corey Fobare gave special credit for the overall success of the consolidation initiative to the leadership of Del. Austin, Covington Mayor Tom Sibold, Allegheny County School Board chairman Jacob Wright and, especially, Covington School Board vice chairman Jonathan Arritt.

“Based on the responses of key actors, it seems reasonable to conclude that if Jonathan Arritt had not been elected to the Covington City School Board in 2018, the consolidation of schools would not have occurred,” Fobare wrote. “While Jacob Wright played the role of ‘point guard’ and was a great consensus builder, without Jonathan Arritt to bridge the gap between the two localities, most respondents believe this effort would not have succeeded.”

Of its place as a blueprint for other school consolidation efforts, Fobare added, “It is expected that a record of the events and essential factors that were found to be pivotal in the decision to consolidate these school divisions in the Allegheny Highlands could be useful to other school divisions, both in Virginia and elsewhere in the U.S., that might be considering a similar decision for both the fiscal health of the local communities and the best pedagogical outcome for students.”