

Minerva Central  
School District



# A District Report and Recommendations for Strategic Action Planning

2014-2015

Presented by:  
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April 24, 2015



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# Minerva Central School District

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## **Introduction**

The Minerva Central School District Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools requested the services of Capital Area School Development Association (CASDA) to present a report leading to the development of a Strategic Action Plan. Relevant academic performance and financial documents were thoroughly reviewed and feedback was gathered through interviews and focus groups. The study was led by the CASDA Faculty team of Mr. Terrance Brewer and Dr. Diane Albano.

## **Nature of the Work**

- Conduct a Document Review of the district's vision, mission, goals and school resources
- Interview specific focus groups ( parents, community members, teachers, students and the Board of Education) to identify strengths and weaknesses
- Compile data from interviews, focus groups and documents for a final report to be used in the strategic action planning process for the Minerva Central School District

## **Deliverables**

The primary deliverable is a District Report to the Superintendent and Board of Education providing synthesized findings and recommendations in three areas: transparency and communication, educational opportunities and community partnerships. These recommendations are to be incorporated into a District Strategic Action Plan to include leadership, instructional programming, fiscal management and partnerships for all students in Grades K-12.

## **Methodology**

On March 30, 2015, CASDA Faculty conducted focus group meetings with important constituent groups including community members, teachers, parents and students. CASDA faculty met separately with each group to ask a series of established questions to foster discussion and feedback. (Appendix A)

Documents reviewed included: NYS School Report Card, school budget, enrollment trends and the district's Vision, Mission and Goals.

## **History and Current Structure**

Minerva Central School District is located in Upstate New York in the Adirondack Mountains. The NYS Report Card for 2013-2014 reflects 112 students, with a free and reduced lunch rate of 47%. Students with disabilities account for 14% of the student body with 100% of all pupils meeting proficiency in high school ELA and Math. All accountability measures have been met for Grades 3-8.

In recent years, the School Board has discussed with the possibility of school merger and potential consolidation of programs with neighboring school districts. The discussions focused on sharing resources to expand educational opportunities for both staff and students in the face of diminishing financial resources. While neighboring districts have not been receptive to merger or large-scale program consolidation, these discussions have led to some the sharing of some services and combined a combined sports program with Newcomb CSD.

Over the past ten years, there has been an educational and cultural shift in Minerva. In the past, a majority of staff lived in the district. Families with children attending school provided steady enrollment while community residents and businesses consistently supported the school district's programs and annual budget. In recent years, the demographics of the community are shifting to a more senior population. Families with school aged children are no longer staying within the district as economic opportunities for working families continue to decline in the Adirondack region.

The academic expectations for students and staff have shifted from Regents and non-Regents diplomas to Regents standards with more rigorous expectations and programs for all students. The requirements of Common Core implementation, annual performance reviews for staff and administrators and reporting requirements to the State Education Department have placed additional strain on the financial resources of the district.

In addition, the development of school budgets has been regulated to meet Tax Cap requirements, the shifting tax base within the community and contractual obligations for staff. These restrictions have resulted in the district using its fund balance to meet financial obligations and stay within budget parameters that will garner community support for programs and operations.

During the 2014-2015 school year, Minerva Central School District was operating on a contingency budget. The Board of Education described the 2014 budget process as difficult due to the loss of state aid, strains on staff and student programs driven by Common Core implementation and increased reporting processes to SED as well as the economic struggles within the community. The annual budget vote was a stressful and emotionally driven situation. The District developed a budget that would require passage by 60% of the voters. The budget vote did not meet the 60% super majority vote prescribed by State requirement, resulting in a contingency budget for the 2014-2015 school years.

### **Findings:**

### **Strengths and Assets:**

The CASDA consultants met with several focus groups from the school district and identified consistent themes shared between stakeholders. The Board of Education, teachers, community, parents and students all stated a desire to have a dedicated, diligent faculty working with students at all levels. Small class sizes provide the opportunity to identify students' needs and offer a platform for a personalized approach to instruction. Appropriate educational supports are in place for students with exceptional needs.

Based on small class sizes (av. 9/class), the teachers get to know the students very well. Some students referred to feeling like teachers were their “friends.” Parents reported that teachers “go above and beyond to help students.” Parents indicated that 100% of the students graduate with 95% going to college.

The District shares athletic teams with Newcomb Central School District, which is approximately 15 miles away. Students and parents noted these extra-curricular opportunities.

### **Challenges and Areas of Concern:**

Community members, parents, and teachers recognize the challenges the District faces with budget increases, declining enrollment and expanding costs. Year-round residents of the community expressed concerns regarding the impact of seasonal second homes on their property taxes. Retirees who no longer have children attending school expressed similar concerns. Some families are leaving the community or not moving into the district due to the lack of educational opportunities for their children. . The Town’s Volunteer EMS, fire and rescue squad are all in a tentative status.

The Board of Education has sought feedback from the community, at meetings designed to generate community involvement. However, communication of the schools mission and goals are not clear and transparent to all constituents.

As a result of the defeated budget vote in May 2014, the school district was operating on a Contingency Budget. The defeated budget also resulted in substantial cuts to both programming and staff.. A Grade 5 teacher was cut, resulting in a combined Grade 5/6 classroom, an Administrative Principal position was reduced in January, 2015 and overall support staff was reduced. The Distance Learning Lab (\$64,000) was cut, elective course offerings and band were eliminated and field trip experiences could no longer be provided.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations in this report are intended to provide guidance and resources for action planning in the design of a District Strategic Plan by the Board of Education, School Superintendent and staff. The District Report focuses on three major areas:

### **Transparency/Communication**

- Design a transparent plan for communication that would provide teachers, parents, community members and students with more input and opportunities for sharing information and planning to support long-term decision making for the District.
- Identify key leaders of constituent groups to serve as liaisons addressing reciprocal communication between the school and community. Design scheduled meetings to share information and discuss future planning using data and community feedback. If necessary, meetings could be held in community centers outside of the school to encourage participation from community groups.
- Provide a monthly newsletter for the community of school events, information sharing and planning.

### **Community Partnerships and Community Culture**

- Include the community in more school events and invite stakeholders to participate in forums to discuss the future of Minerva. Extend the school's efforts to open partnerships with community organizations such as "Minerva Cares", PTSO, MSO, and local "power brokers" that can represent a community voice on school programs and operations.

- Review and assess changes within the Minerva community. Develop a conversation on; cultural changes within the community, demographic shifts in population, interest in shared opportunities between the school community, local business, and opportunities to expand sharing programs, resources and staff with other educational institutions regarding the future endeavors of the Minerva CSD.
- Design a timeline to address established goals in alignment with the District Mission and Vision and District Advisory Team. Examine fiscal and educational opportunities with neighboring schools to support enriching school programs and sharing resources.

### **Educational Opportunities**

- Convene a District Advisory Team comprised of members from the school district, business owners, community and parent members, and representatives from BOCES and SUNY Plattsburgh to revisit the mission and vision of the District and to identify action steps that will explore alternative educational structures for the District over the two to four years, such as; K-8 school, tuition out high school students, or collaborating with other schools regarding bussing or other support services.

The guidance office must provide clear information to students interested in visiting colleges. Counselors must also maintain a connection with students going on college visits.

- Re-instate the Distance Learning Lab to increase the number of high school course offerings. This will reduce the number of currently scheduled study

halls for students. Explore College courses to be supported during the day for students and evening classes for community members.

- Provide professional development opportunities for teachers to address the needs of diverse learners, using data to inform instructional planning and strategies. Expand classroom strategies for differentiation of lessons to be delivered in the regular education classroom.

### **Summary:**

The Minerva Central School District has a strong history of support from the school community, staff and students in a small, rural school district.

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The rich, nurturing environment is embodied by small class sizes, individualized instruction for students and a school that serves as the focus of the Minerva community.

In recent years, there has been an educational and cultural shift in Minerva. Previously, a majority of staff lived in the district, families with children attending school provided consistent enrollment and community support from residents and businesses for the school district's programs and annual budget has been favorable.

The demographics of the community are shifting toward a senior population, families with school aged children are not staying within the district, and economic opportunities for families continue to decline in the Adirondack region.

Academic standards have grown more rigorous. The requirements of Common Core implementation, annual performance reviews for staff and administrators and reporting requirements to the State Education Department has paced additional strain on the district's finances.

In addition, the development of schools budgets has been regulated to meet Tax Cap requirements, tax base shifts within the community and contractual obligations for staff. The budgeting process has resulted in the district using its fund balance to meet financial obligations and stay within budget parameters that will garner community support for programs and operations.

The Board of Education and School Administration recognize the challenges facing the school district and have committed to developing a strategic planning process that will open a discussion and review of the Minerva Central School District.

The guideline for the Strategic Planning Process is based upon information generated from a review of Minerva SCD reports, New York State Report Card and work with school and community focus groups during this review.

CASDA faculty, Dr. Diane Albano and Mr. Terrance Brewer are appreciative of the manner in which the Board of Education, Superintendent of Schools, staff, students and community members openly discussed their support and concerns regarding the Minerva Central School District. The insight and understanding provided by each of the constituent groups creates a strong foundation for a Strategic Planning process that will positively and thoughtfully guide Minerva Central School District into the future.

# Appendix A : Interview Questions