FAQs PROPOSED THREE SCHOOL SYSTEM MERGER IN CATAWBA COUNTY

MERGER PLAN FAQS

When will the Board of Commissioners formally vote on the proposed merger plan?
The vote will occur at the Board's regular meeting on Monday, April 20, 2026. The meeting takes place at 7pm in the Catawba County Board of Commissioners Meeting Room at the Catawba County Justice Center, located at 100 Government Drive in Newton.

When would the merger be effective, if approved?
The merger is proposed to be effective July 1, 2028.

What would the merged school district be called, if approved?
The district is proposed to be called the Catawba Valley School District (CVSD). The governing body would be called the Catawba Valley Board of Education (CVBOE).

If the merger is approved by the State Board of Education, what would happen between that date and July 1, 2028?
If the merger plan is approved by the State Board of Education, the Board of Commissioners would create the Catawba Valley Board of Education (CVBOE) by appointing its members. This new CVBOE would then immediately begin a structured planning process to guide the transition, in preparation for July 1, 2028.

This time period would be considered an interim planning period. It would be used to plan for and execute the transition from three school systems into one.

Current schools and staff would continue to operate to provide for the educational needs of the community. During this interim period, there would be four school boards operating simultaneously: one for each individual district, and one for the future merged system. Capital projects will also continue moving forward.

How would the new school board be established?
The CVBOE would consist of nine members: two members from the existing Catawba County Board of Education; two members from the existing Hickory City Board of Education; two members from the existing Newton-Conover City Board of Education; and three at-large members who are residents of Catawba County. If an existing Board of Education member declines an appointment, the Board of Commissioners may appoint an at-large member from within that district to fill that seat on the CVBOE.

These members would be considered "interim" members and would remain in place beyond the effective date of the merger until successors have been elected and sworn in to serve the Catawba Valley Board of Education.

After the merger becomes effective, how would members of the merged school board be selected?
Successors to the interim CVBOE would be elected to staggered terms in the 2030 and 2032 elections. Two would be at-large members who are residents of Catawba County, and one member would be elected from each of the seven county-wide high school attendance districts. These districts would be drawn as follows:

Seat 1: Fred T. Foard High School Attendance District
Seat 2: Hickory High School Attendance District
Seat 3: St. Stephens High School Attendance District
Seat 4: Bunker Hill High School Attendance District
Seat 5: Newton-Conover High School Attendance District
Seat 6: Bandys High School Attendance District
Seat 7: Maiden High School Attendance District
Seat 8: At-Large
Seat 9: At-Large

What would happen to the existing school boards?
The three existing school boards would remain in place until July 1, 2028, at which point they would be dissolved.

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What would the Catawba Valley Board of Education do during the interim planning period?
The Board would meet monthly (or more often as determined by the CVBOE) to establish policies and procedures and develop an organizational system to implement the merger, with guidance from an attorney hired by the CVBOE. The CVBOE would also be responsible for hiring a Superintendent for the district.

What would happen to staff in all three school districts if the merger occurs?
If the merger becomes effective, all employees of the three existing school districts would become employees of the merged school district, subject to the Catawba Valley School District's terms of employment.

Through the merger plan, the Board of Commissioners provided clear direction for no reduction in staffing as a result of the merger for a minimum of two years following the effective date of the merger.

Would high school students be allowed to finish where they began?
If the merger is approved, this decision would ultimately be made by the CVBOE. The Board of Commissioners has provided clear direction through the merger plan that the CVBOE, when considering any student assignment change, give priority to students currently enrolled in high school by allowing them to remain at that same high school through graduation, if they choose. Secondary priority would be given to siblings of students currently enrolled in high school, with the objective of easing the impacts of attendance transitions on families.

How would a merger impact educational quality?
The intent of the merger is that all students in the merged school system be afforded the highest quality education possible. The merger would broaden the range of educational opportunities available to students county-wide to provide more options for learning.

How would a merger impact special programs?
If the merger is approved, this decision would ultimately be made by the CVBOE. The Board of Commissioners has provided clear direction through the merger plan that, at minimum, for the first two academic years following merger, these programs would be substantially maintained as currently offered:

- Hickory City Schools Orchestra
- Hickory City Schools Advanced Placement Academy
- Hickory City Schools Career & Arts Magnet
- Newton-Conover City Schools Discovery High School
- Newton-Conover City Schools Conover School
- Catawba County Schools Challenger High School
- Catawba County Schools Agricultural Education

GENERAL FAQS

Why is a merger of the three school systems in Catawba County being considered?
Sustained long-term student enrollment declines in both Newton-Conover City Schools and Hickory City Schools have led to significant under-utilization in current school facilities. As a result, both districts are expected to continue losing state funding at a concerning rate regarding maintaining existing student services. At the same time, increasing student enrollment in Catawba County Schools has caused a demand for more school classroom capacity, both now and over the long-term. To address the Hickory and Newton-Conover City Schools' recurring operating budget issues and to harness taxpayer savings realized through Catawba County Schools' facility construction cost avoidance, the Catawba County Board of Commissioners is evaluating the possibility of merging the three systems.

Is saving money the main reason the County is considering a merger?
No. While it would result in significant taxpayer savings associated with future capital costs, a merger is being considered to stabilize Hickory City Schools and Newton-Conover City Schools in the face of sustained enrollment and funding declines. This will help prevent detrimental impacts on the student classroom experience.

What are the primary benefits of a merger?
A merger would insulate students from service reductions associated with continued enrollment declines. It would also bring greater balance to the instructional and extra-curricular options available to K-12 public school students countywide by expanding students' opportunities across all schools.

Merger removes the constraining boundaries that exist between districts, resulting in one district with more constant enrollment (which stabilizes funding, and, therefore, programming) and the flexibility to use existing facilities and resources as needed to adapt to enrollment changes over time with the least long-term disruption to students and staff.

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What would happen if the systems didn't merge?
With enrollment declines, schools would continue to lose enrollment-based state funding. Unless this trend reverses itself in a sustained way, this would result in ongoing cuts to school budgets and staff, ultimately resulting in closed schools and inoperable systems.

Why is redistricting between systems by moving the lines not being considered?
Redistricting is not something that can be done locally. The Board of Commissioners lacks authority to move district lines. The North Carolina General Assembly is the body with this authority. Redistricting offers a temporary partial fix, and the outcome cannot be guaranteed. It would also take significant time to get this solution implemented, and in the meantime Catawba County is spending significant resources on an annual basis to deploy mobile units that would not be needed in a merger. Redistricting does not allow the agility and flexibility needed in the face of an uncertain future; it hinders the County's ability to respond to future growth shifts.

Would any schools be closed as a result of this merger?
No schools are being considered for closure. Schools that are partially empty would gain more students to help alleviate overcrowding.

What would happen to the neighborhood feel of my child's school?
Because schools would likely not close, schools would be able to maintain school-based pride, culture, and traditions.

How many students would have to relocate?
No specific decisions have been made that would determine exactly how many students would be relocated in a merger. However, a majority of students in all districts would remain in their same schools. Ultimately, this is a decision the CVBOE would make.

Even if a merger does not occur, some students would still need to be relocated within their existing school districts to maximize available classroom space.

Would students have longer bus routes?
Transportation distances for a large majority of students would not change. Students relocated due to merger would be assigned to a school located near their current school. The commute could be longer or shorter depending on where students live, but not significantly so.

How does this issue impact taxpayers?
With a merger, the property tax increase needed to build school facilities would be lower. Without it, the tax increase would be higher. This is because without a merger, underutilized space in each of our systems is not accessible to address the needs in the other systems. A merger would fix this.

What is the merger process in North Carolina?
North Carolina General Statutes allow for school district mergers to be initiated by either local boards of education or a county's board of commissioners, subject to approval by the State Board of Education. These mergers are governed by North Carolina G.S. 115C-67 and 115C-68.1.

Mergers initiated by a board of county commissioners must combine all districts in the county into a single county-wide district. Catawba County does not have the authority to merge two of the three districts.

The process currently being considered by Catawba County involves the Board of Commissioners initiating the merger by adopting a statutorily required merger plan after a required public hearing. The merger plan:

- Names the merged unit
- Sets an effective date of merger
- Establishes a board of education for new unit, including number of members, method of election or appointment, whether at-large or district-based, etc.
- Demonstrates ability to set a funding level at least equal to the highest of any of the three districts over the past five years.

If the Board of Commissioners were to formally adopt the plan to merge all three districts, the written merger plan would be submitted to the State Board of Education for approval.