

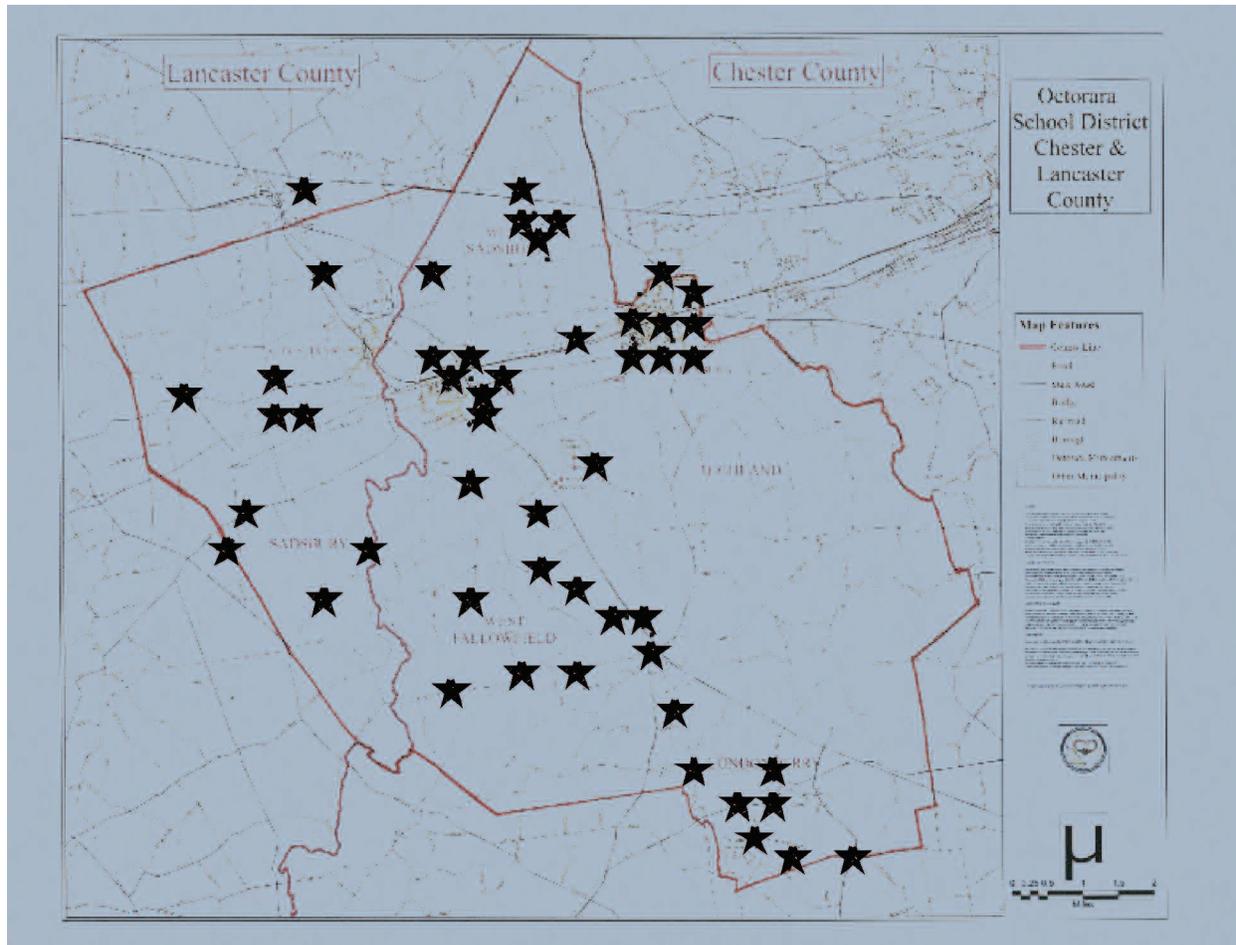
A Community Conversation

The School Board and Administration
partnering with
Chester County 2020
presents
Octorara Area School District

One Community... Many Voices



March 2010



The Octorara Area School District lies in Lancaster and Chester Counties. With 93 square miles, the district consists of eight municipalities; Atglen, Christiana Borough, Sadsbury Township, Parkesburg Borough, Highland Township, Londonderry Township, West Fallowfield Township, and West Sadsbury Township. The municipalities were represented in *One Community ... Many Voices*.

Chester County 2020: Finding Common Ground with Uncommon Resolve



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Chester County 2020 Community Conversations fill a unique role in reaching community understanding and cooperation. Every Conversation emphasizes partnerships to communicate more effectively, strengthen the sense of shared community, and find the common ground that always exists. The partners may include municipalities and non-profits organizations, focusing on natural and farmland preservation, affordable homes, transportation, education, economic challenges, and other elements in our daily lives. They explore the future working with respect, creativity and honesty.

Few people feel they have enough hours in their days or days in each week to become community volunteers. Clearly, an evening's Community Conversation is a generous gift from residents to their community. Varied attitudes and experience contribute to the task at hand. It is consistently predictable that by the end of a Conversation, the prospect for making good things happen has increased dramatically.

The Octorara Area District School breakout groups were remarkably engaged from the first moment — ready to work, make new friends, and look to the challenges. The cover map reflects this far-reaching school district of farms, fields, villages and small towns, the highway 41 corridor and diversity – 93 square miles, 10 miles south of Route 30 and 9 miles north of Route 1, within 30 miles of Lancaster, Reading and Wilmington. The list of issues related to the rural-suburban make-up of the area, with neighborhoods side-by-side with century and bi-century farms, small urban communities like Atglen and Parkesburg with critical services, the agricultural economy, and a growing number commuters traveling to Wilmington, Philadelphia and Lancaster. Crop, cattle and dairy farmers contribute to the area's rural environment and the strong farmland preservation program. Farm markets and roadside vegetable stands and crafts support fresh produce. However, this pleasant land also wrestles with the realities of tax burdens, public safety, worries about drugs, and concerns around the traffic on Routes 41 and 10.

And on to the Conversation

The rules were easy:

- ◆ Approach the Conversation with an open mind.
- ◆ Show respect for one another's ideas.
- ◆ Be willing to think far out of the box, and to listen and learn.

The Community Conversation began with a lengthy list of community issues, printed on large posters. Each individual had five colored adhesive dots to affix to the issues he or she considered those most important. You were not to target five dots on one issue. CC2020 staff tallied the dots while the breakout groups enjoyed a light supper, shared interests and recruited a volunteer for a report at the end of the Conversation. With the tally completed, the 6 top issues would determine the priority issues.



The Issues and the Ratings

The six bolded issues became the topics for discussion.

50	Tax Burden — what makes it what it is compared to other regions?
28	Education quality & performance
25	'Regular Ed' – does it get its 'fair share?'
21	Athletic curriculum – place & cost in OASD vs other schools – opportunities for ALL students
18	Cultivating sources of revenue - Brownfield development tax revenue opportunities
17	Public safety – preventative measures substance abuse in and out of school

The lower rated issues are also important for their thoughtful input, too.

The Lower Rated Issues

- 16 Transportation challenges & solutions
- 12 Shared community activities
- 11 Extra-curricular activities – funding and opportunities for students
- 11 Wise planning; comprehensive planning
- 11 Lack of community forum, beyond OASD –
- 11 Farmland preservation
- 5 Future cost of emergency services
- 7 Career & tech education opportunities
- 6 Total family health body mind & spirit in our community
- 3 The Octorara community in the broader region, unique relationship with Lancaster
- 3 Open space does it help or hurt?
- 2 Driver's education
- 1 Attitudes against more new residents?
- What are we actually spending money on? How to find out?
- Route 41, Route 10 safety issues
- Ethnic diversity & opportunity

'New' arrivals – welcome?
County – problems and advantages
Farmland preservation
Need valid local media

Local and Regional Trends, Values, and What We Want In Common

It was interesting to observe the impressive consensus within the individual breakout groups. The District as a broad community is committed to “making it work.” The basic OASD constituency included wide diversity:

Single, no children in the schools
Married, no children in the schools
Parents with children in school: elementary, middle school, high school
Retirees: long time residents and those recently arrived in the district
Business as shopkeepers, artisans, professionals, educators, and contributions to the varied community's cultural life
Business people who may not reside in the district
Farmers and the allied economic services
Alumni (who also might have been current or past parents)

LOCAL AND REGIONAL TRENDS

The Conversation expressed the participants' perceptions:

Revenue & Tax Burden

Positive trends

- Build infrastructure
- Need to bring commerce and industry to the area

Negative trends

- Municipal decline of business development
- Lack of development
- Poor governing
- Regional municipalities counter-productive to school funding

Safety

Positive trends

- Keeping kids occupied with extracurricular activities—athletes: pay to play?
- Who will bring in more revenue?
- Random drug tests for sports

Negative trends

- Every community has a drug/sex problem and Octorara is no exception
- Some schools have dog searches

Economic Development

Positive trends

- Public Services: power, water, sewer
- Public policy and public attitudes
- Development should be kept close to existing public utilities and or water, sewer, gas and electric lines
- Appropriate industrial/commercial development to generate ratable
- Property tax relief
- Sustaining agricultural and rural character

Education Quality & Performance

Positive trends

- PSSA test results-make more available
- How can you free up teachers more?

Negative trends

- Family responsibilities make it difficult volunteer time
- Gifted and special education funding; NCLB; inclusion has taken time away from regular ed. students
- Can poor teachers be fired?

PRIORITY VALUES

- Better use of tax monies since the top issues discussed at the conversation all roll up into the tax burden issue
- Increase community involvement
- Municipalities cooperating as one community
- Education quality and performance

- Fixing the tax issue
- Lower tax burden
- Equity in tax burden. i.e. real estate tax vs. sales tax
- Developing new sources of tax base, i.e. industry and commercial growth
- How to attract business
- Bringing in commerce and industry
- Improve commercial growth to grow tax base and infrastructure to support it
- Brownfields

- Well-planned, well-discussed development focusing on our strengths
- Cultivating sources of revenue
- Jobs and tax revenue
- Local production vs. consumption
- Develop stronger tax base and employment opportunities

- Parental support is really important
- Community can be a larger issue: due to multiple counties; townships; mailing addresses; phone zones, and no community paper
- Quality for regular education students. Support all of the spectrum.
- Building and maintaining healthy families
- Transformational vs. transactional focus

- Safety
- The intersection of Route 41 and Highland Rd.
- To influence positive choices among kids through a peer type program
- Introducing these subjects as part of the curriculum in the middle school level
- Healthy choices
- Preventive messages about drug use, sex education, positive choices
- Parental intervention
- Quality education and communication
- Improve quality of education



WHAT WE WANT IN COMMON

- Repair/ fix/ decrease tax burden
- Increase in commercial source of revenue
- Build up/ incentivize commercial industry to move in

- Earlier education with peer involvement
- Issues to be addressed, and at a younger age
- See new policies set in place

- A safer intersection

- Brownfield development
- All students will have the same opportunities

Players

- School administration, teachers, peers, parents, district
- Professional consultants—i.e. SADD, Hero's
- Triangle of parents, students, and administration
- Municipal, county, and state officials, residents, planning commission, professional consultants, business community (strong consensus)
- School
- Everyone involved because we all have a stake: municipal and county officials, residents, business community, planning commission

Findings

The Trends, Values and What We Want in Common set the scene for considering the comments and suggestions throughout each of the issue-based group reports. A complete report from each group appears as an Appendix. Findings and Conclusions are drawn directly from those reports.

1. Be resourceful and imaginative: don't be hindered by old ways of thinking. Barriers can be overcome. Use Community Conversations understanding to transform cooperation.
2. The tax burden touches many elements:
 - a. economy overall
 - b. infrastructure
 - c. municipal decline from the development climate
 - d. school funding
3. Tax revenues must be maintained or even increased to support education services. At the same time, the tax burden on individual families must be stabilized or even reduced. Constructive suggestions included:
 - a. Use existing revenues as efficiently as possible.
 - b. Choose solutions that benefit the broader community.
 - c. Encourage the public in the process, with a transparent process.
 - d. Well-planned commercial growth.

4. Wisely-managed growth can solve tax revenue problems in the Octorara community. The breakout groups shared constructive suggestions:

- a. Build the quality of life in this appealing region.
- b. The whole community must to recognize the stake it has in quality education
- c. Concentrate growth near existing services.
- d. Market the village/urban gatherings to generate local and region consumers.
- e. The Octorara Area School District is an excellent education product, and a “draw.”
- f. Octorara is largely an agricultural area: emphasize ag-related growth by sustaining the agriculture and values of the rural character.
- g. Promote opportunities for brownfield development in the highway/urban centers; are not competition for valuable farmland.
- h. Multi-municipality cooperation as one community.
- i. Prefer to have the community in the center of work, play and shop – with healthy businesses.
- i. Balance of open space, farming and new business.



5. Conversation participants agreed that the Octorara Area School District is a magnet to the broader community. Well-defined goals:

- a. The public must be kept better informed, with a two-way partnership with the school and the public.
- b. Parental support is vital to the education process. It must be encouraged.
- c. Children’s safety is an overwhelming priority, with their families and teachers enlisting community-wide interest.
- d. The School District’s effort to strengthen the center of the community, with the utilization of the school campus for activities like conference, lectures and recently CC2020’s Master Planner Program.
- e. All students gain from the varied opportunities.
- f. The sense of community is strongest if there is direct school contact, especially when children are in school. Interest by the general population unless a specific activity surfaces.
- g. The whole community must recognize the stake it has in quality education.

6. In the Octorara community region who shares responsibilities? The participants answered, “Everyone!” A sampling of statements:

- “We need more meetings like this one.”
- “We all want to thrive, but most of us need greater personal financial security. If our vision were fulfilled it would allow senior citizens and lower income families to stay in their homes and not have to worry about moving because they cannot afford the school property taxes.”
- “We need municipal outreach, community involvement and action, legislative advocacy.”
- “We can’t afford to have a lack of vision. Open discussion forums will help us find solutions, but everyone must be involved.”

7. Communication can be the strongest and biggest challenge. There is no single, widely accepted manner for contacting the entire community. Options include:

Website

Email newsletter

Printed newsletter

Newsletter sent with students (reliable?)

Telephone tree

Chester County 2020 Comments

1. CC2020 staff noticed some distinct qualities about the Conversation:
 - a. The participants became engaged in the Conversation process immediately.
 - b. Participants raised issues with suggestions for accompanying solutions and action.
 - c. Concerns about expenses and revenues were woven throughout the Conversation, but it was clear that the primary priority is a healthy Octorara school community.
 - d. Board members, faculty and staff, although observers, were obviously interested in the discussions.
 - e. Consider the future of the urban centers (Atglen and Parkesburg) as railroad services, become available.
 - f. Regarding farms as non-productive, i.e., “raise tax on farms” as largest industry. What does/doesn’t the farmer contribute to the value of life:
 - In place of the farms? Developed land with infrastructure, residents use about \$1.35 of each dollar of tax revenue as compared of the farmer’s \$.65.
 - Act 319 assesses the farmer’s land as growing crops, not as development value. If a farm were to transfer from agricultural use (residential or commercial), the preferential assessment is no longer in existence.
 - The farmer’s future is our future — food. The Delaware Valley Region Planning Commission Food Study (2010) mentions the 100-mile around Philadelphia as the “food shed” – including Chester County with Lancaster County at the edge. Agriculture will be translating into new areas of business and employment opportunities. The report says, “investment in a stronger local food system, while not intended to make the region self-sufficient or protectionist, may become a necessity to meet growing demand.”
 - g. The comments indicate a desire for tax reform, but no easy solution emerged. Tax reform will continue to challenge the legislature. However, in the current tax/economy climate, this may be the time for changes. Talk to your legislators.
 - h. Quality education and opportunities is the goal for all students. There is a perception that special education and gifted programs compete funding with mainstream programs.
 - i. A thriving school district like OASD deserves and requires community support. Community involvement is beneficial, although families’ commitments reduce the pool of available volunteers.

Conclusion

The most potential product of the OASD Community Conversation is open, honest discussion and the understanding of the value of partnerships. The Report and the Appendix support the School Board, Administration and the Community with a wide range of information. We hope that the 98 participants left with a far better understanding of the goals and challenges of the Octorara Area School District.

Chester County 2020 appreciates the opportunity to work with the Octorara Area School District in planning for a bright future.



Sincerely,

Nancy Mohr, President

With CC2020: William Stevens
Aimee Wharton

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APPENDIX

Cultivating Sources of Revenue & Tax Burden

Preferred future

Making choices that are not self serving, but rather made with the good of everyone involved

Live, work, play and shop all within Octorara area

Educate as to why our expenses are so high

Cultivating sources of revenue

Businesses within the community, commercial development

Infrastructure needs state subsidy in order to be built

Elimination of property tax, increase sales tax 1% and .5% on income

Increase community involvement so our political leaders can hear our voices

Recognize the tax base problem and make adjustment

Bring business or industry into Octorara area in order to cultivate revenue

Be open to the idea that we may need to raise taxes on “our” largest industry—the profitable farms—but also look to attract businesses that can be good neighbors

Incentives for businesses to locate here

Lower taxes that will bring industry, higher taxes keep them away

How do you get there?

Explore model successful communities bringing in business. Example: Avon Grove

Better use of all money

Anticipated accomplishments/ benefits of your plan:

Ease burden on individual property tax

More tax revenue, lower real estate taxes

More local and municipal community working together

Increase in employment

Balance of rural vs. small business

Less travel and more money spent in the area

More money for the district

“Extra money” could be used to help defer costs for community activities which would improve quality of all people’s lives

People would be involved and come together
Balance between open space, farming, and new commercial business growth
No plan – just ideas



Potential Barriers

Government

The government not addressing the tax burden

Old ways of thinking

No coherent plan or cooperation between municipalities

Personal agendas of elected municipal officials

Increase of high tax which will deter business

Federal and state laws

Increasing tax burden, lack of funding

Federal, state, and local mandates that make cost unreasonable

Cost

Nobody working together and people only thinking of themselves

Lack of involvement

One track mindset – people might not be open to the need to move into the future for our future generations – but that means not obliterating the agricultural industry (English and Amish)

Get around the barriers:

Community awareness

More community members attending local meetings and trying to communicate the possible opportunities—try to get municipalities to come to 20/20

Revolution

Band together with other districts throughout the state and petition Harrisburg as a united group

Community discussions

Better cooperation with municipalities

Municipalities to get more involved in Octorara Regional council

Educated municipal leaders w/ regard to business development

Electing officials (not self serving)—our votes must go toward solving the tax burden rather than our own personal agenda

Streamline, decrease spending by using money more efficiently

Elections

Tax incentives for business

Incentivize by knowing that more business, commercial and industrial, benefits all

Bringing in more business

Prospects for cooperation:

Planning commissions
Increasing community involvement

What incentives might make differences

Tax incentives
State to help with infrastructure (water, sewer, electric)

Safety**Preferred future for your group's issue:**

Parental advisory policy committee
More children making smarter, safer, and healthier choices

Stronger prevention efforts
Curriculum addressing prevention – doesn't have to be an added expense
Ongoing curriculum developed incorporating peer groups (community service) providing real life stories to help educate students and deter harmful choices
See policies put in place to deter substance abuse
Safety: More outreach to community and State Representatives for improvement, outreach to Penn Dot

How do you get there?

Incorporate drug/ sex topics into the Intermediate (school) health curriculum
Assembly (PTO sponsored) to help initiate class discussions
Testimony
Contact Tom Houghton

Is there an area of easy agreement?

Early intervention – High School is too late

Anticipated accomplishments/benefits

Better choices being made by our children
Better impact on school performance leading to successful adults
Healthier and safer children, fewer at risk children
It would be a better place to live if we had less people using drugs
Safer district
Maximize positive choices of kids in the school
Less substance abuse

Potential Barriers

Privacy issues
Parental resistance
Delivery of message
Student message/ delivering message through peers
Peer pressure

Limited funding for program
Finances, tax burden

There are a lot of accidents (Highland/ Route 41) but not enough statistically to tip the scales and secure funding

How to get around the barriers:

Policy

Education

Incorporate information into existing formal curriculum, i.e. Health

Develop student groups to provide peer input

Peer to peer clubs

Seek grants

Use other resources for funding

Targeted spending at younger ages to influence smaller decisions that have a longer term impact

Personal contact

Local resources, community service, National groups

Parental input

Workshops for primary caregivers and parents

Workshops for teachers since they are the eyes and ears of the school



What incentives might make a difference?

Financial funding

Economic Development

Preferred future

Build upon what makes this area great

Agricultural businesses: Dairy, market ready foods, support services, trades

Concentrate any new development along or close to existing public utilities and preserve the rural nature of Octorara region

Develop stronger tax base and employment opportunities

Commercial development

Quality education and opportunities without overtaxing the local tax payers

A mix of short term solutions (appropriate development) coupled with broad policy change relating to education funding

Different form of taxation to fund public schools and education

Increased state funding

Legislation to spread the cost for "clean and green" to *all* taxpayers across the state

How do you get there?

Education

Encourage business in municipalities

Anticipated accomplishments/benefits

Increase tax revenue – production vs. consumption

More involvement and cooperation

Broader range of opportunities

Thriving with greater personal financial security

If our vision were fulfilled it would allow senior citizens and lower income families to be able to stay in their homes and not have to worry about moving because they cannot afford the school property taxes

Additional activities for all people

Potential Barriers

Lack of vision. We need different forms of taxation to fund public schools and education

Preexisting system: educational evaluations and state standards

Townships, public, and other businesses: differing policy views and attitudes

Municipal short-sightedness

Some don't want Personal Tax relief

Government and partisan politics

Views of development/ assumptions about development

Developers with deep pockets

How to get around the barriers

Education/open discussion forums

More openness to innovative ideas

Education and diversity

Increase opportunities available in this area for kids (jobs, school activities)

Schools stop parenting kids

Municipal outreach, community involvement and action, legislative advocacy

Community planning

Zoning

State support/grants

Vote in senators and legislators

Communication and education

What incentives might make a difference?

Tax and zoning incentives

Education and Performance

Preferred future

All students will have the same opportunities

Continued focus so the issue is simply not forgotten as it is not mandated

How do you get there?

More parent volunteer time (possibly mandatory)

Mentor system for single parents, ESL, etc.

Involve community, invite senior citizens to have an intergenerational exchange

Is there an area of easy agreement?

Attempt to develop communication system
Study successful schools and learn from them



Anticipated accomplishments/benefits

Better informed public
New sense of community
More participation
Students' improvement
Better resources for teachers
Less money allocated for punitive measures
Better students make better citizens with future tax payers, awareness of support, continued improvements

Potential Barriers

Busy or uninterested parents
Lack of comprehensive planning
Absence of media resources
Need for comprehensive/holistic planning
No one organizing, developing, and implementing a plan of action in line with our vision
Resistance to change

School funding
Funding, legislature: both funded and unfunded mandates
Teachers' union

Get around the barriers

More cohesive community involvement
Comprehensive community planning, including emphasis on parental involvement
Lobby legislature
Potential alternative model
Key leaders dedicated to transformational thinking and action

Prospects for cooperation

Everyone needs to be engaged and committed



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Chester County 2020: Finding Common Ground with Uncommon Resolve