

# **The History of the Consolidation and Centralization of Sachem Schools**

## **Part II: 1948 to 1955**

**By Kennedy Brady**

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The period of calm following the release of the “master plan” in 1947 was brief; soon, the pressures of population growth forced concerned taxpayers to react publicly to the suggestions made by the Rapp Commission.

On April 21, 1948, Herbert A. Falk, Superintendent of the Sayville Schools, which then accepted secondary pupils from areas outside its boundaries, including Holbrook and Lake Ronkonkoma, addressed a meeting of the Joint School Planning Committee of the district and described the problem of overcrowding in Sayville as “desperate.” Walter M. Ormsby, District Superintendent, who also spoke at the gathering, cautioned against taking large numbers of tuition-paying youngsters on a year-to-year basis, especially since a district could saddle itself with a substantial bonded debt for new buildings and later lose many of its non-resident students to another system.

A committee was formed, therefore, of representatives from Holbrook, Lake Ronkonkoma, Oakdale-Bohemia, Ronkonkoma, and Sayville “to study the organization of all districts into one unit where the costs of education could be equitably divided.”<sup>1</sup>

This group, which held preliminary sessions to discuss their mutual financial and housing problems and to consider the possibility of consolidation or centralization, as recommended in the “master plan,” agreed to hold its report in abeyance until after the Legislature convened in January, 1949, trusting that the State would pass bills making unification economically attractive.<sup>2</sup>

In the interim, Justice of the Peace Harold C. Sorenson, also the attorney for the Lake Ronkonkoma Board of Education, revived his earlier proposal. After he addressed the Lake Ronkonkoma Civic Association, this organization urged a change in the statuses to allow for the creation of a central high school district.<sup>3</sup> He also

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<sup>1</sup> “Ask Sayville Groups to Solve Problem of School Space Lack,” *Newsday*, April 21, 1948, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> “Seiffert Defeated in Annual Election; Survey Plans Lose,” *Suffolk County News*, July 16, 1948, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> “Lake Ronkonkoma Civics Ask Legislation for Creation of Mid-Island High School,” *Suffolk County News*, Feb. 18, 1949, p. 1 and p. 8.

secured board permission to travel to Albany, where he arranged for a meeting with the Commissioner of Education.<sup>4</sup>

On Feb. 9, 1949, Assemblyman Edmund R. Lupton introduced the act Sorenson hoped would become law, one which provided for the “formation of new central high school districts from two or more adjoining school districts having a total of 500 or more pupils in grades 7 to 12 on the petition of voters and after special meeting and approval”; it was passed on March 25, 1949. A companion bill, submitted by Sen. S. Wentworth Horton on Feb. 10, 1949, was ratified on March 30, 1949. Intensive lobbying began once this measure reached Gov. Thomas E. Dewey.

Although the act had been submitted on behalf of constituents in our area, board members and community leaders from Nassau County sent letters to Dewey urging him to sign the bill,<sup>5</sup> which Lupton defended in his correspondence with the counsel to the Governor:

The County needs centralization of schools to properly distribute the tax burden, but no progress has been made along this line and there is no promise at this time of any centralization in the very large districts as set up in the Rapp Committee Master Plan, which is apparently the only course that the Education Department favors. Under this bill some progress is actually possible in centralization of schools in the County and the example of these districts, I believe, will be helpful to the general progress of centralization. I, also, believe it is commendable that the local people are interested in their elementary schools and want to keep the management in their present districts, I believe, will be helpful to the general progress of centralization. I, also, believe it is commendable that the local people are interested in their elementary schools and want to keep the management in their present districts.<sup>6</sup>

The measure, however, was opposed by the State Education Department, which maintained it was “very difficult to figure the equalization formula for two districts which use the same valuation”; the State Department of Audit and Control,

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<sup>4</sup> “Minutes of the meeting on Feb. 15, 1949,” TS, p. 96 and “Minutes of the meeting of March 8, 1949,” TS, p. 97 in “Minute book of the Board of Education, Lake Ronkonkoma, N.Y., July 16, 1946-Jan. 22, 1953.”

<sup>5</sup> “Board of Education, Union Free School District No. 3, Town of Oyster Bay, New York, to Gov. Thomas E. Dewey, April 5, 1949; Board of Trustees, Glen Head School, Glen Head, N.Y., to Gov. Thomas E. Dewey, April 5, 1949; and, School Committee, Non-Partisan Civic Association, Town of Oyster Bay, New York, to Gov. Thomas E. Dewey, April 7, 1949, in New York State, Gov., “Veto No. 282, 1949,” The Veto Jacket Collection, New York Public Library, Main Branch, New York.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund R. Lupton to Charles D. Breitell, April 7, 1949, in New York State, Gov. “Veto No. 282, 1949.”

which criticized the overlapping jurisdiction of two boards; and, the New York State School Boards Association, which saw “no reason for providing a new law to do substantially what another law was repealed for having done ...”<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, on April 28, 1949, Dewey vetoed the bill; he did it, however, rule out future legislation: “I think the situation in that area should be canvassed by the State Education Department to ascertain if some special problem exists there that requires special treatment.”

To summarize, the board members in Holbrook were investigating the Sayville plan, while the trustees in Lake Ronkonkoma were exploring this proposal as well as the one advocated by Sorenson. The leaders in Holtsville-Farmingville were also considering more than one option. On Dec. 12, 1949, representatives from this system attended a meeting in Patchogue “to discuss the possibility of forming a large school district combining about nine towns, including their own hamlet as well as Bellport, Blue Point, Brookhaven, East Patchogue, Medford, Patchogue, South Haven, Yaphank, and West Yaphank. The board members voted against joining this Greater Patchogue Consolidated School District, however, fearing a loss of “all control over elementary and high school affairs.”<sup>8</sup> The trustees proved more receptive, though, to creating a central junior-senior high school district, which once again, was being advanced in the neighboring community.

On Jan. 10, 1950, Sorenson was granted permission by the board members in Lake Ronkonkoma to call a meeting of the five districts interested in his plan so that the proposal could be presented to the lawmakers in Albany for their prompt consideration.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, on Jan. 13, 1950, the trustees from Holtsville-Farmingville gathered with their counterparts from Centereach, Holbrook, Lake Ronkonkoma, and Selden and unanimously approved the idea of organizing a central junior-senior high school district governed by a board of education of five members, one from each system. Sorenson was instructed to ask Assemblyman Lupton and Sen. Horton to introduce the appropriate enabling legislation,<sup>10</sup> which they did on Jan. 26, 1950 and Feb. 1, 1950, respectively. After the act was approved in both houses; the Governor received letters for and against the measure; but, on April 20, 1950, he vetoed the bill, effectively ending the debates.

The defeat, however, may have been anticipated. During the same period the Sorenson proposal was being studied in Albany, leaders from Holtsville-Farmingville were actively pursuing still another alternative. On Jan. 10, 1950, the trustees and principal from this district met with Ormsby and board members and administrators from Bayport to consider future tuition charges at Bayport High School.

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<sup>8</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of Jan. 3, 1950,” MS, p. 8, in “Minute Book of the Board of Education, Holtsville-Farmingville, N.Y., Nov. 28, 1949-June 20, 1950.”

<sup>9</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of Jan. 10, 1950,” MS, p. 8, in “Minute Book of the Board of Education, Holtsville-Farmingville, N.Y., Nov. 28, 1949-June 20, 1950.”

<sup>10</sup> “Minutes of the Meeting of Jan. 17, 1950,” MS, p. 8, in “Minute Book of the Board of Education, Holtsville-Farmingville, N.Y., Nov. 28, 1949-June 20, 1950.”

After discussing the merits of signing either a five-year or a one-year contract with Bayport to educate our secondary pupils, the trustees from Holtsville-Farmingville went into executive session and decided to put the latter proposition to the people. By voting in the affirmative, the taxpayers would have denied Bayport the freedom to plan for the construction of additional classrooms, while insuring that their own board remained unencumbered by a long-term, binding argument; unfortunately, this choice also would have resulted in a costly fee of \$125 per student for the school year. Before this balloting occurred, our trustees received another offer.

On Feb. 3, 1950, the Bayport Board of Education wrote “that there may have been some confusion” at the joint meeting held during the previous month since “the only information then available was that” Holtsville-Farmingville “was very much interested in joining another central district, and merely wished to have temporary accommodations awaiting further development.” If, however, our trustees were “willing to make a commitment . . . to effect a central school district,” including the two systems, as well as Blue Point, then Bayport would accept secondary students from our community “at \$100 per pupil per year for the next one or two school years.”<sup>11</sup> The reply from our leaders was favorable and swift, for on Feb. 7, 1950, they adopted the following resolution:

That the Trustees of Holtsville Common School District No. 13, Towns of Brookhaven and Islip, request Mr. Ormsby to sign an application to the Commissioner of Education for a survey of the possibilities of centralization for the present Holtsville, Blue Point and Bayport School Districts.

Also, in the special election held on March 9, 1950, the residents gave these representatives complete freedom to negotiate by authorizing them to enter into a one to five year contract.

The board members probably acted quickly, aside from capitalizing on the economic advantage that merely exploring this proposed merger would bring, in an effort to reduce the strain that the rapid influx of newcomers had placed on their hamlet, a problem which had become critical in Holtsville-Farmingville, as well as Holbrook and Lake Ronkonkoma, as thousands of people moved to Long Island.

TABLE 1

Increases in population, 1940-1960, in the towns within the Sachem area, Suffolk County, N.Y.

	1940	1950	1960
Brookhaven	32,117	44,522	109,900
Islip	51,182	71,465	172,959
Smithtown	13,970	20,993	50,347

<sup>11</sup> James Wilson Young, president of the Board of Education, Bayport, N.Y., to Paul Gormsen, president of the Board of Education, Holtsville, N.Y., Feb. 3, 1950 in file “Consolidation Project,” Office of the District Clerk, Bayport-Blue Point Union Free School District, Bayport, N.Y.

SOURCE: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1960.

These figures became even more meaningful, though, when they are translated into the challenges they posed for our trustees, such as providing classroom space to educate the rising number of children in our three districts in the period immediately before and after the release of the "Master Plan":

TABLE 2

Growth in elementary school enrollment, 1944-49, within the Sachem area

	1944-45	1945-46	1946-47	1947-48	1948-59
Holbrook, Grades 1-6	64	77	69	90	119
Holtsville-Far mingville, Grades 1-8	115	118	149	162	172
Lake Ronkonkoma, Grades 1-6	117	139	142	157	226

SOURCE: Suffolk County Trustees Report, Archives, NYS Library, Albany, N.Y.

The greatest impact of the foregoing trends, however, continued to be felt outside of the Sachem area by those neighboring systems which housed our secondary students in their buildings. On Dec. 6, 1950, for example, Samuel K. Munson, Superintendent of the Sayville Schools, warned board members from Holbrook, Lake Ronkonkoma, Oakdale-Bohemia, and Ronkonkoma that "anticipated increases in the number of non-resident pupils" would "far exceed the capacities of the local buildings" after 1951-52. Although Munson "urged that joint action be taken within the near future to avoid further overcrowding," it was Ormsby, also present that evening, who outlined the following alternatives: First, Oakdale-Bohemia and Sayville could set a date after which no more tuition-paying youngsters would be accepted, forcing the remaining systems to merge.

Third, the parties could centralize and jointly finance a new senior high school "somewhere in the northern part of Sayville." Fourth, the existing arrangement could be continued while Sayville erected "a new building on its own based on renewed contracts with the out-of-town districts." The group agreed to discuss these suggestions at the next monthly meeting.

Before this session, the boards from Centereach, Holbrook, Holtsville-Farmingville, Lake Ronkonkoma, Ronkonkoma, and Selden gathered individually and requested a survey on possibly forming a central school district in mid-Island area. Informal applications such as these were not binding but were usually submitted "solely for the purpose of obtaining information." In addition, the Commissioner of Education welcomed these "first petitions" in order to avoid useless efforts on the part of local citizens.

Nevertheless, Ormsby was “far from optimistic” about the proposal, maintaining it would “wreck” the “Master Plan.” Speaking before representatives from Holbrook, Lake Ronkonkoma, Oakdale-Bohemia, and Ronkonkoma in Sayville on Jan. 31, 1951, he also remarked that the mid-Island grouping would probably be opposed by Bayport, Port Jefferson, and Smithtown, systems which would lose secondary students from Holtsville-Farmingville, Selden and Centereach, respectively, if the idea came to fruition.

Munson added that while his district still remained interested in the recommendation made by the Rapp Commission, the trustees in Sayville would “go along with whatever course the majority of boards” wished to take. In contrast to his comments of Dec. 6, 1950, the Superintendent stated that Sayville now believed it could continue to accept non-resident pupils for several more years because of an anticipated decrease in enrollment due to the “quicken tempo of the draft.” Starting in Sept. 1951, through, tuition would be increased from \$125 to \$160 per child.

After learning of Ormsby’s reaction to the six-district proposal, the board members in Holtsville-Farmingville, who cannot be criticized for failing to study every road to reorganization, wrote the trustees in Patchogue and called for a meeting “to discuss consolidation for a high school program.”<sup>12</sup> A session was scheduled for April 19, 1951, but Arthur Bahnmuller, a member of the Board of Education in Holtsville-Farmingville, later reported he “had gotten nowhere” at this gathering, probably because Patchogue was exploring a union with Medford at this time. Talks were continuing, however, on a plan that had been introduced over a year earlier.

On Oct. 24, 1951, representatives from Bayport, Blue Point, and Holtsville-Farmingville met in the former community to consider the options that Ormsby indicated were open to these systems: The districts could centralize. Bayport and Blue Point could consolidate, receiving youngsters from Holtsville-Farmingville on a contract basis. Bayport could refuse to accept all out-of-town students. Bayport could build a new high school, setting tuition charges for pupils from Blue Point and Holtsville-Farmingville. As outline in the “Master Plan,” Bayport could send its children to Sayville; those from Blue Point and Holtsville-Farmingville pledged to review each of these possibilities and to report their final decisions at a session with Bayport scheduled for the following month.

When the board members gathered at the Patchogue Hotel on Nov. 7, 1951, trustee George Holmes of Holtsville-Farmingville stated that his district, “did not want to consolidate with Blue Point and Bayport,” “that centralization at this time did not fit into their plans,” “but that they would like to continue on the same contract basis” for three or five years. Bayport and Blue Point, though, agreed to attempt to bring about a consolidation, one which was later approved.

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<sup>12</sup> “Minutes of the meeting of March 27, 1951,” TS, p. 28, in “Minute book of Union Free School District No. 13, Holtsville-Farmingville,” New York, July 5, 1950-Feb. 21, 1955.”

In coming to a conclusion, the leaders from Holtsville-Farmingville had to weigh many factors, including the pros and cons of the varied approaches to unification, as distinguished below:

**Two methods of district reorganization / open to area school boards in 1951**

<b>Consolidation</b>	<b>Centralization</b>
1. the new district succeeds all the rights of property possessed by the annulled districts	1. the component districts continue to exist in law for the purpose of holding title to the school properties which they brought into centralization
2. the bonded indebtedness of a dissolved district becomes a charge on the consolidate district	2. the bonded indebtedness of a component district may not be spread; each must pay its own
3. the revenue obtained from the sale of any school property is applied for the benefit of the consolidated district	3. when the property of a component district is sold, the proceeds must first be applied against any outstanding bonded indebtedness that the component district incurred
4. the dissolved district is not guaranteed a local school within its original boundaries	4. the people of a component district may vote to continue instruction, K-6, in a school that was operated within its area at the time of centralization
5. all the trustees serving at the time of consolidation go out of office except those from "absorbing" district; later, the people may increase the board to a maximum of nine members; however, there is no guarantee that the officers will represent all of the area	5. all the trustees go out of office on the next July 1 following the vote for centralization; up to nine board members may then be elected; however, there is no guarantee that these officers will represent all of the area
6. there is no building quota	6. the building quota is determined by the number of pupils in the district and the assessed valuation of the area
7. there is no increase in state aid	7. state aid increases based on pupil enrollment

SOURCE: New York State, Laws of 1947, chapter 820, articles 31, 35, and 37.