

## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

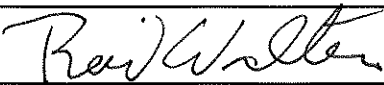
### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Alleghany  
Program Title: Alleghany/Covington School Consolidation  
Program Category: Organizational Development/Regional Collaboration

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Name: Reid Walters  
Title: County Administrator  
Signature: 

## **Executive Summary**

On July 1, 2022, the Alleghany County Public Schools and the Covington City Public Schools divisions formed one singular organization, Alleghany Highlands Public Schools. This merger occurred after years of preparation, public participation, and development of agreements, including shared funding agreements between Alleghany County and Covington City governments.

Significantly, the project creates downward pressure on rising educational costs, helping leaders be more effective stewards of taxpayer resources, while creating increased opportunities for students in public schools. A financial analysis of the merger projected that the joint school division would “eventually” save approximately \$900,000 annually in personnel costs. However, the merger has exceeded those expectations, saving more than \$450,000 in personnel costs in its first year of operations without involuntary layoffs. The consolidation actually assisted school division leaders in navigating an environment of nationwide teacher shortages.

The collaboration involved in this merger followed over 50 years of conversations between community leaders. The historic merger came about through the cooperation of five governing bodies: the elected Board of Supervisors of Alleghany County, the elected City Council of Covington, the locally-appointed Alleghany County School Board, and the locally-appointed Covington City School Board, as well as the statewide Virginia Board of Education. Additionally, the support of Virginia state Delegate Terry L. Austin was instrumental in the forward progress of the agreement. Delegate Austin cited the fiscal benefits of the merger to the Commonwealth and the local governments. As the consolidation plan evolved, Delegate Austin and local leaders referenced other successful school mergers that had occurred in Virginia, including Halifax County-South Boston, and Williamsburg-James City County. The process of collaboration that

led to the Alleghany County-Covington consolidation was featured at the Virginia School Boards Association's Fall 2022 State Conference. The Alleghany County-Covington merger was the first to occur in Virginia since 2014 and only the third to occur since 1982.

While savings to taxpayers were discussed during the consolidation talks, the primary focus was to offer students new and expanded opportunities by combining local resources.. New programs and student opportunities offered by or planned for the 2023-2024 school year in Alleghany Highlands Public Schools include but are not limited to additional career-technical education courses, additional work-based learning resources, heightened services for English language learners, expanded on-site preschool opportunities, expanded alternative and customized education programs offered for students in special situations, improved athletics facilities, enhanced wrestling programs, enhanced swim programs, and expanded extra curricular music programs.

### **Brief Overview**

Alleghany Highlands Public Schools is Virginia's newest school division as of July 1, 2022. After over a generation of conversations, local and state leaders came together to analyze the need for a jointly-operated school division, pooling the resources of the historic Alleghany County Public Schools and Covington City Public Schools. The Alleghany County Board of Supervisors, the Covington City Council, the Covington City School Board, and the Alleghany County School Board came together to form the Joint School Services Committee (JSSC), a body that followed guidelines for public meetings and met regularly from August 22, 2019, into 2022, to accomplish the planning for the project. This work included rich conversation, surveys of the local community, and other forms of input. A "no-harm" merger was successfully planned in which no employees would involuntarily lose their jobs nor see reduced take-home pay.

On July 1, 2022, the central offices and school boards combined their efforts, creating Alleghany Highlands Public Schools. Work continued on additional projects for the new school division ranging from the finalization of refined governance norms for the new board to the welcoming of staff to new buildings. Throughout the 2022-23 school year, the school division relied upon the support of the local community and the governing bodies to execute a variety of projects to enhance opportunities for students and to complete the consolidation of student bodies in 2023-24. The consolidation brought together high school-age students and middle school students from both historic divisions in a newly-configured arrangement of schools creating the Alleghany Cougars, a nod to both prior school divisions (Alleghany from Alleghany County Public Schools, and Cougars as the former Covington mascot).

### **Challenge**

The Alleghany Highlands is known for its beautiful geography and caring people who live in the Appalachian region of Virginia. The Highlands stretches across multiple incorporated areas: Alleghany County, Covington City, the Town of Clifton Forge, and the Town of Iron Gate. In short, the area has tremendous natural resources, spectacular outdoor scenes, a proud history of hard work, direct access to the interstate system and rail lines, a well-located community college campus (Mountain Gateway Community College, previously Dabney S. Lancaster Community College) with capacity to support workforce development, and reasonable proximity to the Roanoke area as a metropolitan hub – yet the area was not experiencing growth.

Faced with a declining tax base and a lack of available land suitable for development due to the surrounding national forest and the overall mountainous terrain, local leaders rightly hypothesized that a key challenge was the fragmentation of resources across the localities and a history, both perceived and actual, of resistance to collaboration. The creation of Alleghany Highlands Public Schools, then, is both a significant project as an accomplishment as well as a paradigm-shifting

moment in the development of the region. By coming together to support its children, its most precious resource, the Alleghany Highlands has demonstrated its evolution as a community that can pool its resources to support itself. This effort is key in creating the quality of life referenced in the Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Corporation slogan of “where exciting business opportunities meet exceptional quality of life.” From schools and infrastructure to housing and health care, serving the ‘greater good’ is always the best choice for the community.

The area has a proud industrial heritage including such businesses as a WestRock (previously known as Westvaco, MeadWestvaco and other names) paper mill, the previous large employer of Industrial Rayon/Hercules/AET that made various film and chemical products, and the previous large employer of Lear Corporation, which was involved in automotive door panel assemblies. The region also has a rich railroad history, with CSX once being the predominant employer in Clifton Forge. The railroad, which was also known as the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, and the Chessie System, dramatically scaled back its operations in the region as the advent of the diesel locomotive enabled trains to travel greater distances without stopovers for maintenance. WestRock, the region's largest employer in the present age, has also gradually decreased its overall employment as advances in technology have enabled the company to more efficiently produce paper with less manpower. Current industries also include lumber production, health care, trucking, and education, although these employers are not in a period of large growth at this time. Many residents of the community commute to work in Roanoke, Hot Springs and White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. Nearby Hot Springs and White Sulphur Springs are the homes to two world-class resorts, The Homestead and The Greenbrier. Both resorts provide employment to residents of the Highlands.

Employment cutbacks in the region exposed an overdependence on manufacturing jobs and a lack of economic diversification. The job losses translated into population declines and a shrinking

retail base over a period of years. Moreover, changes in Virginia's laws regarding the taxation of machinery and tools resulted in significant reductions in tax revenues to the localities. Due to the lack of jobs, the region was left with an aging population, fewer students in schools, and less money to provide basic services such as public education. Alleghany County began to experience precipitous declines in enrollment after Lear ceased operations in Covington in 2005. As a result, county schools saw their enrollment decline by 975 students over a period of years. Covington saw its enrollment modestly increase by 145 students. Over a period of 15 years, Alleghany County and Covington schools saw a combined 22 percent decrease in student population. Student enrollment and other factors weighed into the county's decision to close two elementary schools in 2013.

The decline in enrollment resulted in less state funding to the two school divisions, based on average daily membership. Importantly, the school divisions often worked cooperatively planning professional development, and together, they operated a joint technical education center. This demonstrated that the professionals of the school divisions could cooperate but it did not fully resolve concerns about the expense of operating two school divisions within the Alleghany Highlands.

Specifically, local leaders noticed redundancies between the school division organizations in terms of their structures, creating potential cost savings by combining the school divisions. Importantly, economic development partners began to comment that the inefficiencies created by operating two smaller school divisions in such a geographically tight area were producing conditions less conducive to attracting new employers. In short, it made moving more complicated for possible employees who need to "pick" a school division, and it also reduced opportunities for students in specialized programs and extracurricular activities by failing to achieve economies of scale.

## **Regional Collaboration Solution**

Allegheny Highlands Public Schools, the Allegheny Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, the Allegheny Highlands Economic Development Corporation, and the private non-profit Allegheny Foundation offer proof that local leaders are now focusing on regional efforts to help the community prosper. The creation of Allegheny Highlands Public Schools is a historic milestone in efforts to promote regional cooperation in the Highlands. AHPS is governed by a school board that includes representation from Allegheny County and the City of Covington. AHPS has also forged key partnerships with businesses and organizations throughout the community. The Allegheny Highlands community is now working together to improve education to students, improve the quality of life, and attract businesses and industries. The cooperative spirit is best exemplified by a slogan that was adopted by the AHPS school board after the historic merger occurred in July 2022: "We're working with you to put the unity in community."

It is important to underscore that the merger occurred without harm. In other words, no employees voluntarily lost jobs nor lost take-home pay in the combining of the school division. The superintendent was selected from the current superintendents, and a highly collaborative leadership style is utilized within the school division's leadership team to ensure the participation of all parties.

Students and residents of the Highlands will reap the benefits of the merged school division for years to come, and the historic agreement can serve as a model for other localities in the Commonwealth to follow. Current benefits of the merger include use of best practices and new practices from the former school divisions. Increased resources and programs for students include but are not limited to:

- an expanded preschool program that aims to assist students who are identified as being at-risk for meeting academic and social expectations;
- added career-technical education programs with enhanced collaboration with local industries, particularly in health care, a key current employer in the Alleghany Highlands;
- expanded services for exceptional learners, including particularly gifted learners and English language learners;
- additional access to educational technology; and
- dedicated health services leadership to support school nursing and similar services.

For smaller school divisions, these accomplishments are quite difficult without enhanced collaboration.

While the school division remains somewhat small at approximately 2,700 students, it is significantly larger than nearby school divisions with enrollments of 180, 520, 545, and 915 students, providing the economies of scale to help meet both general education and workforce development needs. In the Alleghany Highlands, companies have direct access to local government leaders as well as school division leaders and can expect prompt and efficient decision-making and support.

Expanded opportunities for students, both in the classroom and out, are key to the success of the merger. These opportunities include but are not limited to:

- two additional health care certifications are available to students and a renewed building maintenance/management program is hiring a teacher;
- collaboration with other regional school divisions and Mountain Gateway Community College to develop a new computer science/computer systems technology laboratory school;
- a refining of the existing Jackson River Governor's School curriculum structure to attract more students;



- the services of a work-based learning coordinator, once the province of only one school division, are extended to all students; similarly, two work transition-focused in-house programs for students with special needs are now also available to all students;
- athletically, experiences in so-called “individual sports” such as wrestling and swimming have already expanded as well.
- in the arts, students were able to form a new collaborative drum line/winter guard group.
- these accomplishments represent significant cooperation between former regional rivals and they are occurring ahead of the full combination of the local high schools, slated to occur in fall 2023.

The combination of the former rival high schools, the Mountaineers of the former Alleghany High School and the Cougars of the former Covington High School, as Alleghany Cougars is monumental. The Joint School Services Committee worked with school division staff to assist the students by allowing their selection of school colors, a handsome combination of Columbia blue and navy blue, also a throwback to both school traditions as one color hails from the previous school colors of each. To build school spirit as the high schools combine, multiple maintenance and renovation projects are occurring as a result of the school division’s funding agreements. These projects range from more standard tasks such as resurfacing parking lots as well as innovative branding-related upgrades, including the refacing of the Alleghany High School gym with safer flooring for student athletes and renewed school spirit. Other facilities upgrades include significant reconstruction of the competition track, a track that was out-of-service for competitions for many years due to wear.

In another cooperative endeavor, home football and baseball games will be played at Casey Field, which is owned and maintained by the City of Covington. The city worked to improve seating at the football stadium and carry out projects to make the aesthetic appearance of the facilities more

pleasing to spectators. The city is also developing more long-range plans for Casey Field that will include the construction of a fieldhouse to better serve AHPS student athletes.

A huge asset in the region and to the consolidation project is the Alleghany Foundation, which was created in 1995 after the local hospital was sold to a corporate entity. The Foundation invested the money and has since used the proceeds to award grants to improve the quality of life in the Highlands. The Foundation has awarded millions of dollars in grants to improve public dedication, health care, mental health services, the arts, and recreation in the region. The Foundation is overseen by a board of directors who are invested in the community and desire to see it prosper. The Foundation's support of the consolidation project has ranged from flagship gifts, such as the support of the planning for the new athletic fieldhouse project to support various sports currently in the bidding stage, to smaller yet critical gifts promoting excellence such as new food services equipment to support healthful choices for student meals. Importantly, the Alleghany Foundation has funded the implementation of a communications specialist position in the school division. While this work has won an award for excellence from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), it has, more significantly, assisted local residents in understanding the successes of the children and staff of the school division. This work has brought deepened relationships with local media, including broadcast outlets in the Roanoke region, that are drawing positive attention to the collaborative regional culture of the Alleghany Highlands.

Extensive branding efforts from the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Tourism have produced a refined image of the area, highlighting its natural beauty, outdoor recreation, broadband connectivity, available industrial space, and cooperation across the region. The Chamber's work includes professionally-produced videos, events promotion, efforts to attract remote employees of other businesses, and more. While this branding has certainly been

significant in communicating about the Alleghany Highlands outside of the immediate region, it has also had local impact. Citizens of the region have begun to see themselves as part of one community – one community with distinct entities, certainly, but the branding has assisted the public in understanding that the four communities composing the Alleghany Highlands are more “in concert” than “in competition” with each other.

Economic development efforts in the Highlands are overseen by the Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Corporation, which is a public-private partnership that was created through a cooperative endeavor between Alleghany County and the City of Covington. The EDC was formed in 2002, and it includes representatives from the elected governments, local businesses and organizations, and private citizens. One of the cornerstones of the EDC’s work occurred in 2017 when Alleghany County and the City of Covington ratified an agreement that called for the localities to jointly develop a tract of land in the Alleghany Regional Commerce Center in Alleghany County. The county and city agreed to share in the cost of developing the property, as well as share tax proceeds and other revenues that would be produced by a company that would locate on the property. Significantly, in 2023, ground was broken on the revenue-sharing pad site, and an additional executive was hired to “wake up in the morning” thinking about economic development across the region. Other recent economic development successes also highlight intense collaboration and include the \$113 million in investment from Green Thumb Industries, a group also committed to giving generously to the schools; the afore-mentioned development of the revenue-sharing pad site; and a 96-unit apartment complex being built centrally in the region to support enhanced housing stock, and offer more affordable housing to people who work in nearby counties.

In conclusion, the Alleghany Highlands Public Schools Division is the cornerstone of a new spirit of regional cooperation in the Alleghany Highlands. It also serves as a model for other localities

facing fiscal stress and the rising cost of public education. In fact, other Virginia localities and school divisions are taking notice of the historic merger as they also strive to provide their students with quality education in an era marked by economic uncertainties. In just one year, residents and students in the Highlands have reaped the benefits of AHPS, and the joint division will better position the local community to facilitate growth by providing quality education to its children for years to come.