

Districts closer to sports merger

Meetings next month could combine Canaseraga, Arkport athletics

By Al Bruce

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ARKPORT — Arkport Central board members took the first official step last week to merge Arkport and Canaseraga Central sports programs.

Discussion of the athletic union is separate from the proposed merger of the two school districts that board members have explored during the past two months.

Superintendent Jesse Harper told about 50 residents, teachers and board members at the district Performing Arts Center that a combined athletics program “could offer more sports opportunities for students” than are currently available at the two schools.

Harper noted the schools have successfully “of necessity” combined teams during the past several years. When Arkport was unable to field enough players for the boys’ varsity basketball two years ago, athletes from both schools played as members of the Canaseraga varsity, for example.

“Participation numbers in both school districts have dropped during the past five years,” according to a letter about the proposed sports combination to residents of each district from the board presidents and superintendents of each school. “We have been working together to join athletic teams and provide student opportunities. These merged teams have offered student athletes the chances to compete together when there would not have been a team.”

“Each year, during student signups, it is questionable whether we will be able to field teams in every sport. Bringing our athletes together will increase the likelihood of having a team available and in some cases (will provide) three levels of a given sport.”

With the proposed athletic merger, the teams would use field facilities from each school, Harper said. Track, cross country and wrestling teams, for example, would use the Arkport facilities, he said.

Baseball and softball games could be scheduled at both campuses and night games would be played at Arkport, which has a lighted field, he said.

Transportation would be at provided “both ways” during fall, winter and spring games and practices, the Arkport superintendent said.

Supervised study halls for athletes would be provided at both schools, he said.

Harper said that “fewer and fewer students are now showing up for the team sports at either school.”

Arkport Central has 450 enrolled students and Canaseraga 235, significant declines from enrollments of even a decade ago. No uniforms will be purchased for the merged athletic programs during the first year, Harper said.

The current plan is to hire coaches from both districts prior to the 2017-18 season, he said. Coaches will be recruited and interviewed during this school year so they will be in place this June, Harper said.

The coaches' succession plan "will attempt to place younger coaches with successful more experienced staff," the superintendent said.

Arkport Central will hire coaches and run the sports program, Harper said.

Arkport athletic director Dale Stiener will direct the merged athletic program but will "spend time in Arkport and Canaseraga," Harper said.

Athletic philosophies "are now close" and probably will be agreed upon before the end of this school year, he said.

Eligibility requirements are also being discussed, Harper said.

"The combined varsity boys' basketball team last year was an overwhelming success from the perspectives of opportunity and team-bonding," said Canaseraga Superintendent Chad Groff in response to a Tribune question. "The athletes from each school district came together, worked hard and had a great time."

Merging all Arkport and Canaseraga sports teams could begin with the 2017-18 school year this September. A formal recommendation will be presented during each school board meeting held at the beginning of April, Harper said. The Canaseraga meeting will be held on April 6.

"As the superintendents and athletic directors from each school begin their work, we would like to hear everyone's thoughts, questions, comments and concerns," the Arkport school leader said.

The superintendent invited "members of the schools' communities to participate in an online survey at the website of each school about this proposed sports merger where residents can share questions, comments and concerns."

Harper, Arkport Central Athletic Director Dale Stiener, Canaseraga Superintendent Chad Groff and Canaseraga Athletic Director Steve Sleight developed the athletic program plan during the past five weeks.