



# FACT SHEET

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## Facts vs. Myths about School Unification

**MYTH: Supporters of a unified school system only want city residents to vote on the school unification referendum?**

**FACT:** Some people have asked why Valdosta residents are the only ones who get to vote on the school unification referendum as opposed to all residents in Lowndes County. By law, counties have the constitutional responsibility to provide public education to all children unless the student lives within an independent school district. The City of Valdosta School System was created by an ordinance of the City of Valdosta.

State law provides two methods to place a school unification referendum on the ballot:

1. A bill introduced and passed by the Georgia General Assembly and signed by the Governor calling for the consolidation of the independent school system with the county school system. It would become law and unification would occur if a majority of the voters within the independent school district and the County school district both voted in favor of legislation.
2. Twenty five percent of the registered voters residing within the independent school district sign a petition to hold a referendum to dissolve its independent school charter. A majority of the voters within such independent school district must vote in favor of such dissolution during the referendum before the two school systems can be unified into a single, countywide school system.

Both options were analyzed, but it was clear early in the process that the first option was not feasible with support from both School Boards. Even if the local delegation sponsored the legislation, we could not find any situation where this process has been used to approve a school unification referendum. Collecting signatures in a petition drive represents the best, most democratic way for the citizens of Valdosta to voice their opinion on how it should provide for the public education of all children in Valdosta. The facts also show that since 1983, the year the first option became part of the Georgia Constitution, all of the school unification votes in Georgia were as a result of a community using a petition process to hold a referendum on unifying multiple school districts within one county.

**MYTH: The Valdosta School Board will have no control of the school unification process if the referendum passes.**

**FACT:** According to Georgia law (OCGA Section 20-2-371), the Valdosta Board of Education would maintain control of the city school system and its properties until the Lowndes County School Board can make arrangements to operate the city school system. In connection therewith, such arrangements will take time and planning. A new, countywide School Board will also be elected to ensure representation for Valdosta residents after the Justice Department has approved the new voting districts. Until this process is completed, the City and County school systems continue to operate as they do today.

**MYTH: If the school referendum passes, teachers may lose their tenure, jobs and pensions since the Valdosta School System will no longer exist.**

**FACT:** If the Valdosta voters approve the school unification referendum, both school systems will continue to operate independent of each other until arrangements are made for the operation of a countywide school system. Many communities in Georgia and throughout the South have unified their school systems during the past 15-20 years. When examining those communities, school-based personnel were largely unaffected, and these issues did not materialize. As for a teacher's pension and tenure, these benefits are protected by state law and have no bearing on the school unification process.

**MYTH: If we unify our school systems, our community will see more busing to achieve diversity.**

**FACT:** This is highly unlikely and seldom recommended as a means of achieving diversity by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Opponents of a unified school system are suggesting this scenario in order to create fear and to foster distrust because the previous desegregation of Valdosta City Schools. This is an important issue for many parents in both Valdosta and Lowndes County. In fact, there appears to be a growing body of evidence suggesting that a diverse student body leads to gains in student achievement, reduces racial prejudices and better prepares children for college and workplace success. When looking at other communities in Georgia that have unified their school systems during the past 15-20 years, the number of students being bused in a unified school system was no different than what the community experienced with multiple school systems.

**MYTH: Our public schools are doing fine as two separate systems so we do not need to unify our schools. In fact, competition between school systems is a good thing and leads to better schools for our children.**

**FACT:** Unlike athletics, competition between school systems is detrimental. At a time when community and business support is essential to expanding instructional programs, internships and mentoring, having to choose between school systems dilutes the impact the community can have on public education. Professional development, which is essential to developing better teachers and improving achievement levels, suffers from duplication of programs and resources in competing districts. There is no empirical evidence that shows two competing public school systems serve children better than one school system.

Today, the graduation rates and academic performance of the Valdosta and Lowndes County school systems are about in the middle of a state that ranks among the lowest in the country. School unification, by itself, will not improve the quality of education, but the data supports that communities with a single school system are more successful in planning and implementing education reform, parental involvement and community support programs which raise student achievement and sustain those gains over time.

A growing body of research tells us several things about school unification. A key driver for building successful schools is the level of support and involvement from the community. When there is one school system with one mission (shared by the community), all of the community's children benefit since resources and/or loyalties are not divided. It has been demonstrated that financial giving and personal service by members of the community is more generous and sustained over time. Also, when school systems combine ideas and resources, they can be leveraged to affect a greater focus on resources and children who need greater support to perform at higher levels in literacy and mathematics. This is not an opinion, but is something supported by data. Neither school system can achieve apart as much as they can achieve together.

**MYTH: Successful academic programs, such as IB and VECA programs at Valdosta High School, run the risk of being eliminated if we have a single school system.**

**FACT:** Successful academic programs and services, such as the IB and VECA programs at Valdosta High School, are unlikely to be affected by school unification. In fact, programs of such nature have a greater opportunity for expansion in a single school system instead of how they operate today. School unification brings a single, countywide focus on improving public education for all children in our community. The best programs of both school systems can therefore be available to all students attending public schools.