

A Simple Handshake: Public Schools for Amish Students in a Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, School District, 1953–1994¹

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Abstract: Public school consolidation during the 1950s and 1960s in Lancaster and Chester Counties, Pennsylvania, sparked an exodus of Amish children from the area's public schools and the establishment of Amish schools. The politics of consolidation in one location, however, resulted in a unique arrangement whereby the Lampeter-Strasburg School District, formed in 1953 in southcentral Lancaster County, operated two one-room schools for Amish residents of the district for more than forty years. The positive relationship between Amish families and public school leaders exemplifies the possibility of comity and cooperation in contrast to the narrative of discord and conflict around Amish schooling in the mid-twentieth-century.

Submitted October 14, 2023; accepted November 22, 2023; published April 30, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.18061/jpac.v4i2.9676>

Keywords: Amish schools, education, Lampeter-Strasburg School District, Lancaster Amish settlement, public schools

Introduction

For more than fifty years, virtually all Amish children in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, have attended one-room, private Amish schools, taught by Amish teachers. Unlike the Amish settlements in Holmes County, Ohio, and in Elkhart-LaGrange and Nappanee, Indiana, in which a sizable minority of Amish children continue to attend public schools alongside non-Amish peers, the Lancaster Amish switched their loyalty to their own schools with remarkable speed in the 1950s and 1960s.² The rapid rise of Amish schools in the Lancaster settlement came in reaction to

¹ The paper began as a presentation by Robert A. Frick at the conference “Country Schools: The Keystone of American Education,” Millersville University, Millersville, PA, June 12, 2023. Frick is a retired teacher (1966–1969) and administrator (1969–2011) in the Lampeter-Strasburg School District. Unfootnoted material in this article comes from his direct involvement, observation, and many conversations through the years with all the parties (Amish and non-Amish) involved in this unique relationship, including conversation with those who were present from its beginning in 1953.

² On persistent Amish public school attendance in Holmes County, Ohio, and in northcentral Indiana, see Hurst and McConnell, *Amish Paradox*, 153–161, and Nolt and Meyers, *Plain Diversity*, 91–93. The



a wave of post-war public school consolidation that resulted in the sudden closure of rural one-room schools and the busing of elementary students to large, centralized buildings. Amish-authored sources identify this development as the key reason behind the establishment of Amish schools in Lancaster and Chester Counties.³

Lost in this narrative is the fact that in one district—the Lampeter-Strasburg School District, formed in 1953—the politics of consolidation actually facilitated the ongoing enrollment of Amish students under public school auspices. For just over four decades, the district operated two one-room schools for Amish children within its boundaries. The origin and success of these schools—North Star and Walnut Run—is a little-known chapter in a story of cooperation and accommodation among neighbors who sealed their promises with a simple handshake.

Public Education and School Consolidation in Pennsylvania

When founding Pennsylvania, William Penn asserted that all children would receive a free education. Unfortunately, for several centuries little was done to put Penn’s idea into practice. The Pennsylvania Free School Act of 1834 was the first inclusive plan for education of all children without differentiating between those who could be charged tuition and those to be taught for free. The act required every municipality to provide a program of education for all its youth, including hiring teachers and building schools at public expense.⁴

For more than a century after passage of the Free School Act, Amish children throughout the commonwealth attended public schools, learning alongside “English” (non-Amish) classmates under the instruction of non-Amish teachers. Each township, borough (the name in Pennsylvania for incorporated towns), and city managed the schools within its boundaries through the authority

percentage of Amish children attending public schools in northern Indiana has steadily declined since the 1970s, however, despite the efforts of some public school leaders to tailor curricula for the Amish. In 2016, for example, the Millersburg Elementary School in Elkhart County’s Fairfield School District became a K–8 school with programs and facilities designed to better serve Amish students (see Thalheimer, “A Little More in the World”); nevertheless, by 2022, enrollment at Millersburg had declined to 329 (from 448 in 2018) and Amish school construction in the area was accelerating. See “Schools for Schools.” Some Amish children in the Buchanan County, Iowa, settlement also attend public schools, but those schools—three in the Jesup Community School District and four in the Wapsie Valley Community School District—are more like the ones described in this article; that is, they are smaller public schools operated specifically for Amish students, rather than the above-mentioned Ohio and Indiana cases where Amish children attend larger public schools with non-Amish peers.

³ School consolidation as the motivation for establishing Amish schools is clear in the school history section of *Pennsylvania Amish Directory* (pp. 19–33). Illustrative of the many examples in this source is the following from page 29: “In 1955, the Paradise Township public school system built consolidated schools and left no provision for the Amish. [Thus,] meetings were held and [Amish] directors elected” who immediately commenced opening Amish schools in the township. Some variation of this explanation is present for every geographic area with the exception of Strasburg Township.

⁴ “The Surest Foundation of Happiness.”

of an elected school board. At least occasionally—and perhaps more often than remembered today—Amish fathers were elected to and served on their township’s public school boards.⁵

In rural areas, Pennsylvania’s public schools were one-room arrangements in which the teacher oversaw eight grades. Already in the 1890s, the state of Pennsylvania had encouraged municipalities to consolidate their schools to save on costs, both for the local municipalities and for the commonwealth. In 1937, school consolidation in Lancaster County’s East Lampeter Township saw ten of the township’s eleven one-room schools replaced with a large building in the village of Smoketown. This intra-township consolidation prompted the establishment of the first two Amish schools the next fall, after parents purchased two of the shuttered schoolhouses and reopened them.⁶ This pair of Amish schools remained outliers for most of the next two decades. It was the 1950s wave of school consolidation in Lancaster County, consolidation that involved the combination of facilities among multiple townships and boroughs, and not just within them, that sparked the widespread withdraw of Amish children from public education.⁷ In the case of what became the Lampeter-Strasburg School District, however, the process of consolidation generated a different and genial outcome.

The creation of the Lampeter-Strasburg School District in 1953 was the result of a lengthy process. For a variety of reasons, many of the townships and boroughs, especially in rural areas, were reluctant to combine because of their different histories and populations. The three municipalities that eventually became the Lampeter-Strasburg School District illustrate this dynamic: a long-established borough, a somewhat suburban township, and a very rural township.

Strasburg Borough had been founded and developed in the eighteenth century. Its school system was strong and boasted the first high school in the county outside of the city of Lancaster. Originally, there were several one-room elementary schools in the borough, but when a new high school was built in 1870, it included enough space to also accommodate primary school pupils. Thereafter, all the children attended school in the same substantial building. No Amish lived in the borough.

West Lampeter Township had the largest population of the three municipalities. It was located just south of Lancaster and the city’s suburbs extended into it. In deference to the farming families in the southern half of the township, the West Lampeter High School followed a primarily vocational curriculum, with courses focused on agriculture, commercial studies, and home economics. Until the 1920s, West Lampeter Township maintained nine one-room schools. As they became overcrowded due to a growing suburban population, a consolidated school was built in the

⁵ E.g., “Upper Leacock Township,” *Lancaster New Era*, Nov. 8, 1933, 16, reporting election results: “Supporters of the Amish candidates for school director in Upper Leacock Township had a 50 per cent success” when one of two Amish men running (among four candidates) was elected. With 283 votes, David G. Stoltzfus came in second and claimed one of two available board seats; John B. Stoltzfus received only 237 votes and came in fourth.

⁶ Lawrence E. Davies, “Amish Faith Issue in Fight on School: Pennsylvania Colony Refuses to Give Up Tiny Buildings for a Big One of PWA,” *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 1937, 75. See also Kraybill, *Riddle*, 164–167.

⁷ See note 3 above.

village of Willow Street in 1927 and all but two of the township's one-room structures were closed. Few Amish lived in West Lampeter Township.

Strasburg Township, the largest of the three municipalities in size, was quite rural. While home to a few non-agriculture-related households, Strasburg Township was primarily a farming community and home to a good number of Amish residents. Although the municipality contained no high school, by 1896 it had ten one-room schools. If a Strasburg Township student wished to attend high school, he or she would enroll in a neighboring municipality and Strasburg Township paid tuition to that municipality.

Despite their different profiles, these three municipalities twice considered merging, both times because of tragedies. On March 22, 1922, the West Lampeter High School was destroyed by fire.⁸ The school board unanimously decided to rebuild the school and invited Strasburg Borough, Strasburg Township, and Pequea Township to share the cost of the new building. The three invited boards all declined. Another fire, this one on Friday, December 22, 1944, consumed the large Strasburg Borough School, valued at \$50,000.⁹ Plans to rebuild this school led to a series of meetings over the next three years in which Strasburg Borough, Strasburg Township, and West Lampeter Township talked seriously about merging their schools. Motivation also came from the Pennsylvania legislature's passage of Act 361 of 1947 requiring all school boards in the state to prepare and submit plans for some kind of consolidation by July 1948.

On March 12, 1952, representatives from Strasburg Borough, West Lampeter Township, Strasburg Township, and Pequea Township met, and each group was asked to vote for or against consolidation. All but Pequea Township voted in the affirmative. Eight months later, a referendum appeared on the November ballot for residents of the three municipalities to vote for or against consolidation.¹⁰

Negotiating the Formation of a New School District

In the meantime, a series of developments had begun to sour Amish families in Lancaster County on public education. In 1949, the state had raised the compulsory school attendance age, and municipalities across the county interpreted and enforced that law differently. In some places, Amish children repeated eighth grade until allowed to end their formal education. In other places, Amish teens were told they must attend consolidated high schools. When they did not, their fathers faced arrests, fines, and jail stints, all of which engendered ill will and often fractured neighborly

⁸ "West Lampeter School Houses Prey of Flames," *Lancaster New Era*, Mar. 24, 1922, 3. (The plural "houses" in the headline is explained in the article to refer to the original high school, built in 1911, and the substantial addition, added in 1916.); "Lower-End Districts Fail to Unite for a Consolidated School," *Lancaster News-Journal*, Apr. 5, 1922, 1–2.

⁹ "Strasburg's School Burns; \$50,000 Loss," *Lancaster New Era*, Dec. 22, 1944, 1, 12. Following the 1944 fire, most of the school's secondary students began attending the J. P. McCaskey High School in Lancaster City. The elementary students were instructed in the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches in the borough.

¹⁰ "New Plans for School Merger, Housing Asked to Go on Ballot," *Lancaster New Era*, Mar. 14, 1952, 1, 10.

relations. Resolution came in 1955 when the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania accepted the vocational school agreement, whereby Amish teens would be considered to be enrolled in vocational apprenticeships after completing eighth grade and would not have to report to high school.¹¹

But in 1952 that vocational school compromise still lay in the future. What was known was that when the Lampeter-Strasburg school consolidation plan was presented to the public, the Amish portion of the public in Strasburg Township would very likely be unreceptive to it. The conflict festering since 1949 had made Amish parents suspicious of the motivations of school officials and even less happy with the idea of consolidated school districts with larger school boards that might be less locally responsive and understanding.

As a result, municipal officials in the proposed Lampeter-Strasburg district recognized that there might be resistance from their Amish neighbors who, then as now, often voted in municipal elections.¹² The Amish could scuttle the proposed plan at the ballot box. Without Strasburg Township's participation in the merger, the other two municipalities would have a hard time uniting since they were not contiguous. Unlike their counterparts in other areas of Lancaster County, these school boards decided to be proactive. They arranged a meeting between Strasburg Township school directors and Amish community leaders. Those representing the proposed school merger took time to listen to their Amish neighbors' concerns, which included:

1. The likely closing of the township's one-room schools and their replacement by "modern" schools, centrally located, perhaps in a town
2. Amish children being put into a world that would be the opposite of the cultural world and simple lifestyle with which they were comfortable

Those representing the proposed new school district asked their Amish counterparts, "What if when the new schools are built, the district would retain two one-room schools in Strasburg Township for your children?" The Amish representatives thought it was a good idea. They asked whether the few Amish children living next door in West Lampeter Township would be able to attend one of these public one-room schools and how they might be transported there. The public school representatives responded that those children would certainly be permitted and could be bused at no cost. When the Amish agreed, the district representatives summarized by saying, "If your community will vote in support the referendum this November, or at least not vote in opposition to the merger, we vow to maintain two one-room schools as long as we are able to do so." Multiple handshakes followed. There was no written agreement.

On Tuesday, November 4, 1952, the referendum on consolidating the three municipalities' schools returned positive results in each jurisdiction. Strasburg Township's results were in line

¹¹ The story of this conflict is summarized in Kraybill, *Riddle*, 168–172.

¹² Evidence for Amish voting in Lancaster County is widely anecdotal and occasionally documented; one review of the historical evidence (as a preview to its 2004 subject) is Kraybill and Kopko, "Bush Fever."

with the other two municipalities and the opposition that civic leaders feared from the Amish did not materialize.¹³

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Strasburg Borough	487	118
Strasburg Township	478	175
West Lampeter Twp.	<u>1,071</u>	<u>400</u>
Total	2,036	693

Amish Schools in the Lampeter-Strasburg School District

When the new Lampeter-Strasburg School District came into being on July 1, 1953, it consisted of three consolidated elementary schools (Lampeter, Strasburg, and Willow Street), a junior-senior high school in the former West Lampeter high school building, and two one-room elementary schools: North Star, built in 1886, in the northern part of Strasburg Township, and Walnut Run, built in 1879, and located toward the southern end of the township.

How did the public school system legally operate two essentially parochial schools for Amish children? The answer is that from the beginning any resident could request to have their child attend one of these schools. However, in all forty-one years the school operated, no such request was received.

Initially, North Star Elementary School housed first through fourth grade students, while Walnut Run Elementary School housed fifth through eighth graders. Later, as the Amish population increased, the grade levels were adjusted to have first and second grade at North Star and third, fourth, and fifth grade at Walnut Run. (Sixth through eighth grade students attended an Amish-built and -sponsored school, opened in 1970.) The teachers were fully certified public school teachers and employees of the Lampeter-Strasburg District. The two schools never had running water but they did have electricity, and each had a landline phone.

The schools' schedule, curriculum, and instructional materials were aligned with that of the district and its state standards. Some exceptions were made. For example, science studies focused on nature and did not include teaching about evolution. As well, no filmstrips or, later, videos, were used in any subject area. In addition, the unamended Pennsylvania School Code of 1949 was followed for the daily start of the school day, with the teacher reading ten verses from the King James Bible and the students reciting the Lord's Prayer.¹⁴

When problems or issues arose at North Star or Walnut Run, they were dealt with in person, again generally ending with a handshake. The Amish population desired to remain part of the wider community but on their own terms, and the district granted them that privilege.

¹³ "Union School Districts Ok'd in Lititz, Strasburg Areas," *Lancaster New Era*, Nov. 5, 1952, 1, 19.

¹⁴ This practice violated the U.S. Supreme Court decisions in *Engle v. Vitale* (1962) and *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* (1963); however, none of the students' parents complained.

The Gradual Ending of the Handshake Agreement

In other parts of Lancaster County and in the Honey Brook area of Chester County, Amish schools sprouted quickly after 1954 and throughout the 1960s. Strasburg Township, however, did not see a burst of Amish school construction, confirming the Amish satisfaction with the North Star and Walnut Run schools the district provided. The first private Amish school in Strasburg Township was built only in 1970, well after other Amish-populated townships had two or more Amish schools each. By 1980, there were still only two Amish schools in the township, alongside the two public ones.¹⁵

From the handshake agreement of 1952 until the mid-1970s, the Amish population in the district increased or remained stable. (Student population increases in the 1960s had necessitated the rebalancing of grades taught at each school, as noted above.) In the early 1980s, however, the number of Amish children attending Walnut Run and North Star schools (and in the private Amish schools that had been built later) was decreasing.¹⁶ Meeting with an Amish bishop, the school superintendent indicated that because of low enrollment, either one of the two Amish public schools or one of their private schools would need to be closed, and he invited the bishop to make the call. The bishop agreed and said one of the public one-room schools should be closed. At the conclusion of the 1983–1984 school year, North Star School closed. Thereafter, Walnut Run became a school for first, second, and third grade Amish children, with the others being absorbed into the private Amish schools.

At the public auction of the building in the fall of 1984, North Star was purchased by some Amish households. In 1987, after the Amish school-age population in the township had started to rise, North Star was reopened as an Amish school with an Amish teacher, Lydia Stoltzfus.¹⁷

Over the next decade, as Amish schools opened in West Lampeter Township and as attendance at a public school became more and more of an anomaly in the Amish community, the number of Amish children choosing to attend Walnut Run School declined. Finally, at the conclusion of the 1993–1994 school year, Walnut Run closed.¹⁸ The era of public one-room schools had come to an end in Lancaster County, but its final decades had included a significant example of positive

¹⁵ *Church Directory*, xix-xx. The schools were Bunker Hill, opened on Deiter Road in 1970, and Beaver Valley, opened on May Post Office Road in 1973.

¹⁶ The cause of this decline is not entirely clear, but the 1970s were a time of significant outmigration from Lancaster County by Amish newlyweds and young families seeking farmland in other parts of the state. Between 1973 and 1978, many young families moved to Centre, Clinton, Dauphin, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, and York Counties. Starting in the 1980s, a new pattern took shape: Amish households overwhelmingly remained in Lancaster County but took up nonfarming occupations.

¹⁷ *Church Directory*, xxxi.

¹⁸ Lampeter-Strasburg School District did not sell the Walnut Run School because it sits on land donated in the nineteenth-century by several different property owners and the current owners of these parcels each hold partial claim to the land, creating a complicated legal situation should the school district ever relinquish the building. With the support of the Lampeter-Strasburg School District board of directors, community volunteers, student service projects, and Eagle Scout projects, the building has been restored to what it would have been around 1900. Originally, Walnut Run was used by students and teachers as part of the district's third-grade curriculum on local history, serving as a living history site for elementary classes and others; it is currently not being used for any purpose.

community cooperation across cultures. The Amish parents and the “English” school leaders of Lampeter-Strasburg were parting, but parting as friends.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Penn Johns School in the Conestoga Valley School District was a two-room public elementary school that operated from 1951 to 2007. During the latter portion of its existence, it had a largely but never exclusively Amish and Old Order Mennonite student body. Constructed at a cost of \$40,000, the school was considered a model modern school when it opened; by 2007, three-quarters of the children enrolled were from Amish and Old Order Mennonite families living in that part of the Conestoga Valley School District. Penn Johns School received national attention in 1989 when President George H. W. Bush visited while on a tour promoting the war on drugs policy; see Bernard Weinraub, “Bush Takes Fight Against Drugs to Pennsylvania Dutch Country,” *New York Times*, Mar. 23, 1989, B9.