

# **Mohawk's BEST**

**(Building Education Sustainability & Trust)**

## **Summary Report**

**Originally issued: December 2016**  
**Revised: January 2017**

## MOHAWK'S BEST: THE BOTTOM LINE

The Mohawk Trail Regional School District, as currently funded and operated, is financially unsustainable. The combination of structural inefficiencies, rising costs and flat state aid are putting increased pressure on the ability of District Towns to afford high-quality education. Previous proposals to address the issue of sustainability have either failed to secure the necessary support of all eight District towns or have proven insufficient to provide meaningful relief. **The answer to Mohawk's sustainability issues cannot be found solely by reducing operating expenses. A comprehensive solution must include BOTH revenues and expenses.**

To improve the District's sustainability, the BEST Committee recommends a multi-phase approach that addresses both expenses and revenues:

**Phase 1 (to be accomplished in time for September 2017)** – Work cooperatively with the Heath Education Task Force to implement a strategy for the education of all Heath students (PK - 6) that allows for the closing of Heath Elementary School and the return of that facility to the Town of Heath for re-use.

**Phase 2 (to be accomplished in time for September 2018)** – Expand the Mohawk Middle School to include all 6th grade students on the Mohawk campus.

**Phase 3 (to be accomplished in time for September 2019)** – Collaborate with member towns to redistrict and consolidate elementary students (PK to Grade 5) into two schools, creating two new learning communities at the current Buckland Shelburne Elementary and Sanderson Academy sites.

### **Ongoing (from now forward)**

- Develop a clear educational vision and mission for the District that emphasizes educational excellence and positions MTRSD as the most attractive alternative in the region for students with a broad range of aspirations.
- Work closely with the Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition to further a legislative agenda that addresses the revenue challenges faced by rural schools.
- Continue efforts to identify opportunities to reduce transportation expenses, particularly after June 30, 2019 (when the existing bus contract expires).
- Identify and take advantage of opportunities to share personnel and resources with neighboring districts in ways that further our educational goals while increasing operational efficiency.
- Create an alumni network to maintain enthusiasm for MTRSD and fundraise for key initiatives.

## Longer Term

If, following the completion of Phases 1-3, it appears necessary to consider further consolidation options, the BEST Committee recommends that the School Committee then consider commissioning in-depth analysis of the financial feasibility of constructing a single, centrally located elementary school as a way to maximize operational efficiencies and attain the educational advantages inherent in having all resources in a central location.

**NOTE: The BEST Committee's original recommendations anticipated completing an assessment of the feasibility of creating a single, centralized PK-12 campus by December 2017. However, following a series of community meetings to discuss the recommendations, it was clear that centralization was being viewed as BEST's "preferred" final result. This perception had the effect of clouding the public's consideration of Phases 1 - 3 independent of any potential centralization plan. As a result, on January 10, 2017, the BEST Committee voted to de-emphasize centralization by making it clear that it viewed this option as a longer-term possibility to be considered following the implementation of Phases 1-3.**

## MOHAWK'S BEST: SUMMARY REPORT

### I. INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, the Mohawk Trail Regional School District (MTRSD) School Committee agreed to form a Strategic Planning Steering Committee to address the long-term sustainability of the MTRSD. Three School Committee members volunteered to serve on the Committee. In addition, Select Boards in each of the eight MTRSD Member Towns were asked to appoint a representative to the group, as were the Mohawk District Education Association (representing District educators) and the Hawlemont School District.

#### Membership

Original members of the Committee included:

Lark Thwing, Chair, MTRSD School Committee  
Martha Thurber, Vice Chair, MTRSD School Committee  
Willow Cohen, MTRSD School Committee\*  
Kate Barrows, Colrain Representative  
Karen Blum, Buckland Representative  
Michael Buoniconti, MTRSD Superintendent  
Mick Comstock, Heath Representative  
Mike Kociela, MTRSD Business Manager  
Susan Mitchell, Mohawk District Education Association Representative  
David Newell, Ashfield Representative  
Kim Orzechowski, Hawley Representative\*  
John Payne, Shelburne Representative  
Erwin Reynolds, Hawlemont Representative  
Sarah Reynolds, Charlemont Representative  
Leslie Rule, Plainfield Representative

\* Willow Cohen resigned from the School Committee and BEST in July 2016; Kim Orzechowski was unable to attend BEST meetings.

Glenn Cardinal, MTRSD School Committee (Buckland), Jason Cusimano, MTRSD School Committee (Shelburne) and Amy Looman, Principal Colrain Central School, also participated regularly in BEST meetings, making significant contributions.

## Statement of Purpose

The Strategic Planning Steering Committee held its first meeting on February 24, 2016. Early on, the group changed its name to Mohawk's BEST (Building Education, Sustainability and Trust) and adopted the following Statement of Purpose:

The Committee intends to develop a plan that will help ensure the long-term viability of the District by enhancing educational programs and maximizing college and career opportunities for our students; controlling costs and assessments to member Towns; and enhancing revenue opportunities.

In meeting this goal, our approach was to look at both revenues and expenses. On the revenue side, we focused on two areas:

1. Increase/retain revenues by aggressively marketing the District to students and their parents in order both to attract new students from outside the District and retain (or recapture) students who live within the District but have chosen (or may consider choosing) to be educated elsewhere. A clear ancillary to this is working to create a vibrant curriculum that aligns with students' goals and ambitions.
2. Work with other rural districts facing similar challenges to secure more adequate state aid. MTRSD is not alone. All rural districts in Massachusetts are grappling with similar issues exacerbated by a state funding formula that is both generally inadequate and, in particular, fails to take into account the unique problems of rural districts and towns.

On the expense side, our goal was to determine the most cost-efficient way to educate our students, while continuing to offer high-quality educational programming.

## Subcommittees

In order to work most efficiently to meet our objectives, BEST formed a number of subcommittees with specific responsibilities:

- Communications/Community Outreach
- Education
- Facilities & Finance
- Revenues/Fundraising
- Transportation

Since January 2016, the BEST Committee has met at least bi-weekly (and often weekly) to hear subcommittee reports, analyze and discuss data and listen to community input. While most meetings were held at the Mohawk Middle/High School, BEST also held meetings at each of the District's elementary schools and at the Hawlemont

Elementary School. All meetings were open to the public and minutes were published on the BEST website (<http://mtrsd-best.weebly.com>).

### **Community Outreach**

All meetings of the BEST Committee and all Subcommittees were publicized in advance and comments from non-members were welcomed throughout every meeting. Occasional interviews and articles were published in local media. Updates on BEST activities were reported at monthly School Committee meetings. While public participation was generally modest, there were a number of parents, citizens and educators who attended frequently, making important contributions to our discussions.

In June 2016, as BEST began to review in earnest the integration of 6th grade into the Mohawk Middle School, we specifically solicited input from parents of current students in upper elementary grades, whose children were most likely to be affected, as well as parents of current Middle School students whose children had recently gone through the transition to Mohawk. A total of 35 parents and two students participated in three focus groups held on June 9th to discuss both the positives and negatives of expanding the Middle School to include Grade 6. The BEST Committee found this input enormously helpful. While some parents supported the idea and others did not, the ideas and concerns expressed reinforced to us the importance of careful and deliberate planning for all phases of this transition. These conversations also directly contributed (along with input from administrators and educators) to our decision to recommend implementing this transition in September 2018 rather than September 2017. These sessions also made clear the need for continuing dialog with those most affected throughout the transition process. Comments were transcribed and formed the basis of a thorough report on these discussions, which can be found at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd07>.

In September 2016, all PK – 8 teachers in the District participated in a 2-hour feedback session designed to elicit their views on each of the educational configuration options under consideration by BEST (e.g., PK only at each school, PK-2 only at each school, transitioning 6th grade to the middle school). Teachers were asked to share their “benefits, challenges and concerns” about each configuration. This feedback contributed substantially to the final BEST recommendations. (All teacher comments were compiled; comments specific to expanding middle school to include 6th grade can be found at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd08>).

Finally, BEST will be holding a series of public meetings to disseminate and discuss the Committee’s recommendations and next steps. Meetings will be held at Mohawk, as well as at Sanderson Academy (Ashfield/Plainfield), the Colrain Central School

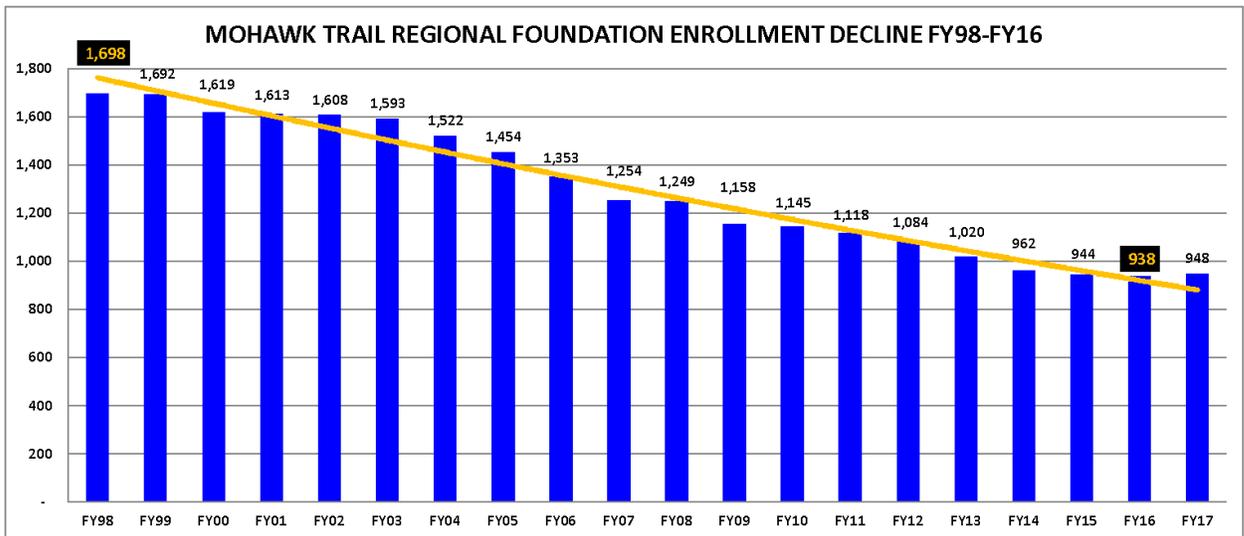
(Colrain), and Hawlemont Elementary (Charlemont, Hawley and Heath) during December 2016 and January 2017.

**II. WHY BEST? HOW DID WE GET HERE?**

Since the turn of the millennium, the combination of declining student enrollment, flat Chapter 70 state education aid, and rising operating costs have resulted in chronic financial (and educational) crisis throughout rural Massachusetts. As the largest geographic PK-12 traditional public school district in Massachusetts, the MTRSD has experienced the worst of these conditions.

The present crisis in the Mohawk District began in the mid 1990s and has become increasingly acute. As depicted in Figure 1, Mohawk's foundation enrollment peaked at 1,698 students in the 1997-1998 school year and began a precipitous decline to a low of 938 students in the 2015-2016 school year, a decline of approximately 45%. Having made no changes to our building infrastructure over this period, Mohawk's capacity now exceeds enrollment demand, even after factoring-in significant changes in the delivery of education that now require more space per student.

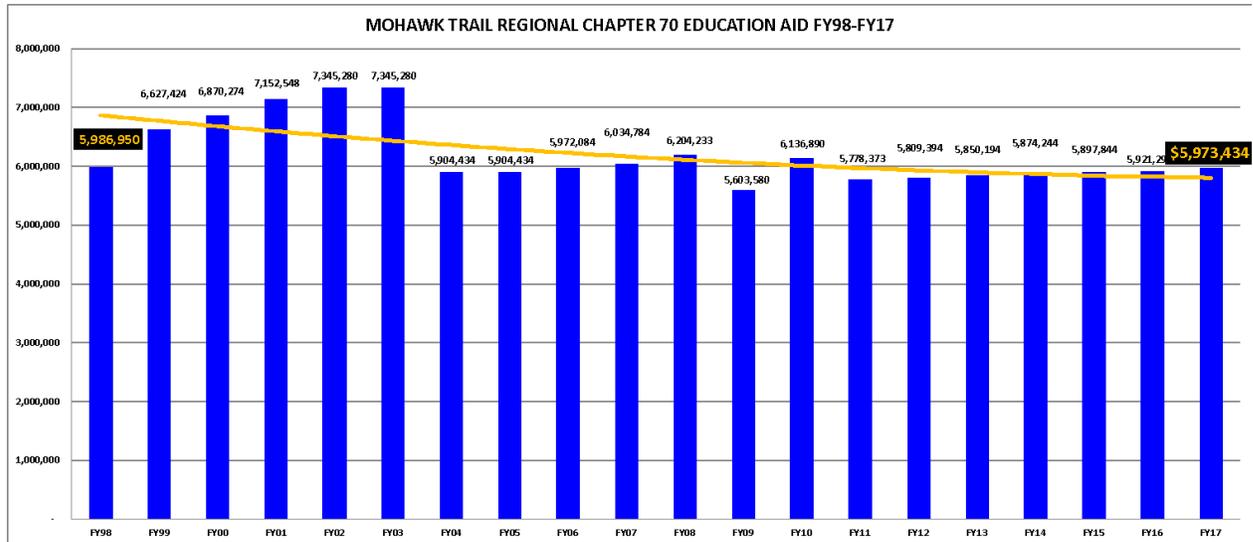
**Figure 1**



At the same time, as depicted in Figure 2, Mohawk's Chapter 70 state education aid (by far the largest source of state funding) has been relatively flat since FY04 (school year 2003-04) and is actually less in FY17 (\$5,973,434 for school year 2016-17) than in FY98 (\$5,986,950 for school year 1998-99). While the Massachusetts legislature has attempted to limit harm to public school districts by generally adhering to a practice of not reducing education aid (often referred to as "hold-harmless"), the net result of the

formula used by the Commonwealth to calculate Chapter 70 state aid has been persistently flat education aid to the MTRSD and about 50 other rural districts.

**Figure 2: Chapter 70 State Aid to MTRSD**



While it is intuitive to think that declining enrollment should translate into proportionately declining costs, the concept of economies of scale does not so easily apply to MTRSD or other rural districts. For example, our elementary schools generally feature only one classroom per grade level. In these schools, if enrollment within a single grade were to decline, say, from 20 students to 15 students, the class must still be staffed with one teacher, thus yielding no operating savings despite a 25% enrollment decline. Similarly, in even very small schools, staffing must include at least a part-time principal, a nurse (which must be full-time if there is even a single student with a pressing medical need), a building secretary, a custodian, and a cafeteria manager. While not all of these positions need be filled full time, staffing is usually half-time or more, thus triggering the need to provide full benefits, including health care coverage, the cost of which often exceeds \$10,000 per employee.

Mohawk's sustainability issues are not new. Over the past decade, two different groups have attempted to address Mohawk's sustainability issues. In the 2006-2007 school year, the Mohawk School Committee formed an Interim Planning Committee charged with developing a 3-5 year interim sustainability plan as a bridge to a long-term solution. A majority of the Interim Planning Committee "regretfully and painfully" concluded that the District's four elementary schools should be consolidated into a single facility at the Buckland-Shelburne Elementary School over a three-year period to reduce operating costs. A series of Regional Agreement amendments were proposed to implement this recommendation. These amendments twice failed to receive the required unanimous approval from all District Towns. (See

the full Interim Planning Committee Majority Report and Minority Report at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd03>.)

The Mohawk Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC), composed of Select Board representatives from each District Town, was created in the spring of 2013 to again explore solutions to the long-term sustainability of the District. The LRPC issued its report in early 2015, with recommendations that focused both on operational savings (*e.g.*, the sharing of excess school space to meet other public needs and the use of alternative energy sources) and the need for additional revenue (*e.g.*, continued lobbying for full state reimbursement of transportation expenses and for state aid to rural districts). The LRPC also recommended passage of an amendment to the Regional Agreement that would permit amending the Agreement upon a 2/3 vote of member Towns rather than requiring total unanimity, as well as an amendment that would add pre-kindergarten to the District's educational program. The Mohawk School Committee has made a number of proposals to implement these recommendations; some have been successful, others not. (See the full LRPC Report at [bit.ly/mtrsd02](http://bit.ly/mtrsd02), and School Committee Follow-Up at [bit.ly/mtrsd02](http://bit.ly/mtrsd02)).

Despite these prior efforts, the MTRSD remains financially unsustainable. While the District's annual operating budget has increased by an annual average of only 0.84% over the ten-year period FY 08 – FY 17 (thanks in large part to a one-time reduction of approximately \$1 million in employee benefits costs following a switch to a state-sponsored insurance program in FY 11), flat levels of state aid have left an increasing gap between costs and revenues to be filled by District Town assessments. Consequently, total Town assessments have risen by about \$2 million over the past ten years, or an annual average of 2.3%.

**The answer to Mohawk's sustainability issues cannot be found solely by reducing operating expenses. A comprehensive solution must include BOTH revenues and expenses.** It is essential that both sides of Mohawk's operating statement be addressed in order to achieve long-term financial sustainability. Focusing on just the operating expense side of this financial equation will not solve the District's underlying structural problem; at best, it will buy time.

Over the past year, BEST has pursued reform on both sides. On the revenue side, Mohawk Superintendent Michael Buoniconti has spearheaded the creation of the Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition, which is focused on increasing state educational funding to rural communities. (Read the Coalition's "Proposal to Establish Rural School Aid" at [bit.ly/mtrsd04](http://bit.ly/mtrsd04).) More modestly, BEST has sought to find ways to help the District keep more of the revenues already available – by reducing the outflow of District students (and funding) to charter and choice options. Working together, BEST, the Mohawk School Committee and District Administrators and Principals have worked to better understand why students choose to stay or leave

the District (through exit surveys and a school climate study); to better “market” District schools to new and existing students; and to help educators and administrators ensure that our curricula matches students’ needs and career/college goals.

On the expense side, BEST generated and reviewed nine different operating scenarios to assess the relative financial efficiency of different combinations of school facilities and grade configurations. While finding ways to reduce operating costs was a key goal, the quality of education in the Mohawk District remained the uppermost consideration. When the two conflicted – when a particular scenario generated substantial savings but at the expense of educational quality – education prevailed. (See Operating Scenario Review at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd11>)

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

On November 1, 2016, the BEST Committee voted to recommend to the Mohawk Trail Regional School Committee a plan to enhance the sustainability of the MTRSD. The plan presents a multi-phased effort. BEST recommended a phased approach in order to allow the School Committee and the entire Mohawk community an opportunity to assess the relative success of each completed phase, and to re-evaluate implementation of each upcoming phase, based on such factors as changes in actual enrollment, increases/decreases in revenues, changes to town finances and assessments, and the expansion of educational opportunities.

**Table 1: Actual Enrollment in District Schools as of September 2016**

MOHAWK FY17 ENROLLMENT CURRENT AS OF 9/1/16																	
	PK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Students	Classroom Teachers	Student Capacity
HIGH SCHOOL											58	67	69	64	258	16.5	560
MIDDLE SCHOOL									78	93					171	10.0	240
BSE	48	37	32	38	33	30	20	25							263	15.0	350
SANDERSON	45	20	12	18	14	17	11	11							148	9.0	225
COLRAIN	15	14	19	19	9	13	17	10							116	8.0	175
HEATH	7	5	6	2	2	2	4	1							29	4.0	115
TOTALS PK-12	115	76	69	77	58	62	52	47	78	93	58	67	69	64	985	62.5	1665

**Phase 1 (to be accomplished in time for September 2017)**

*Work cooperatively with the Heath Education Task Force to implement a strategy for the education of all Heath students (PK - 6) that allows for the closing of Heath Elementary School and the return of that facility to the Town of Heath for re-use.*

Contemporaneous with the efforts of the BEST Committee, the Heath Education Task Force (HETF) has been working to assess various options for educating Heath’s PK-6 students. A combination of rapidly declining enrollment and, consequently, rising per

pupil expenditures has made operation of the Heath Elementary School both financially and educationally unsustainable.

**Table 2: Heath Elementary School PK-6 Enrollment**

<b>AS OF OCT. 1:</b>	<b>NO. OF STUDENTS</b>
2001	126
2005	80
2010	81
2014	62
2015	50
2016	29

In late November 2016, after considering a variety of options, the HETF has chosen to pursue a plan under which (1) the Heath Elementary School would close, (2) Heath would remain a PK-12 member of the Mohawk District (and would continue to send its Grade 7-12 students to Mohawk), and (3) Heath's PK-6 students would attend (one of) Hawlemont Elementary or Rowe Elementary under a tuition agreement negotiated between the Mohawk District and Hawlemont or Rowe. Mohawk would use a portion of Heath's operating assessment to pay this tuition. The Mohawk District and the Town of Heath are currently working to negotiate the details of such an arrangement, which will require the approval of all District Towns, as well as the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

**Phase 2 (to be accomplished in time for September 2018)**

*Expand the Mohawk Middle School to include all 6th grade students on the Mohawk campus.*

The BEST Committee recommends the integration of all 6th-grade students into the Mohawk Middle School, both as a first step toward elementary school consolidation and as a step toward creating an enhanced educational experience for our 6th-grade students.

Integrating 6th-grade into the middle school will provide the space needed to consolidate grades PK-5 into two schools, and without this expansion the consolidation of the elementary schools cannot happen. If the District does not consolidate, the costs of operating with inefficient staffing in underutilized buildings will force a choice between significant budget cuts – cuts that will affect the “meat” of our educational programs – or increasing the property tax burden on Member Towns as they struggle to pay increased assessments. The recommended combination of Middle School expansion/elementary school consolidation will deliver an anticipated operating savings in excess of \$1 million and makes use of the underutilized Mohawk campus, which has a capacity to serve 1,000 students and is currently serves 429 in grades 7 - 12. As importantly, the change provides the opportunity to create a new

learning environment that is academically challenging, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable for our young adolescent students.

Even though over 70% of U.S. middle schools are comprised of grades 6-8, our parents and teachers have told us this option is not without serious challenges. The BEST Committee held three discussion sessions with district parents on the question of expanding Mohawk Middle School to include the 6th-grade. From this discussion, a summary report was created including a list of benefits and concerns (see <http://bit.ly/mtrsd07> ). The Committee found this parental feedback deeply insightful and clarifying. Administrators and educators will use what we learned as a guide to help the creation of a middle school community where all members thrive.

**Parents and students will continue to be an important part of this process.**

Hawley and Charlemont will remain 7-12 members of the Mohawk District, and Rowe will continue to tuition its 7-12 students to Mohawk (pending Rowe's vote to rejoin the District as a 7-12 member). Parents from Hawlemont and Rowe will have the option to "choice" their children to Mohawk for 6th grade, however many likely will elect to remain in their PK-6 school, presenting the challenge of integrating these students into the Middle School in Grade 7. Our neighboring district of Gill-Montague has a similar situation: their middle school students enter in both the 6th and 7th grades. That district has found that the staggered entry point, "has not caused the late entry issues one might expect." In planning the transition for Mohawk 6th grade students, we will continue to learn from the experience of Gill-Montague (and other Districts) and to work closely with parents and educators from Hawlemont and Rowe.

Finally, the BEST Committee found a consensus in the educational research on the issue of optimum middle school grade configuration. One landmark study (Anfara and Buehler, 2005; the full report is available at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd07>) concluded, "...no sequence of grades is perfect or, in itself, guarantees student academic achievement and healthy social and emotional development." (p. 57) What is critical, however, is the transition process and the quality of the education ultimately provided.

The BEST Committee recommends expansion of Mohawk Middle School to include 6th grade not only as a first step toward financial sustainability for our District and Member Towns, but also as an exciting step toward creating an enhanced educational experience for our 6th-grade students.

**Phase 3 (to be accomplished in time for September 2019)**

*Collaborate with member towns to redistrict and consolidate elementary students (PK to Grade 5) into two schools, creating two new learning communities at the current Buckland Shelburne Elementary and Sanderson Academy sites.*

As the next step in “right-sizing” the District’s infrastructure, the BEST Committee recommends consolidating the Colrain Central School, Sanderson Academy and Buckland Shelburne Elementary School (BSE) into two new learning communities at the Sanderson and BSE facilities. The Colrain Central School would be closed and returned to the Town of Colrain for its use. The timing of the return and responsibility for maintaining the property in the interim will need to be negotiated between the Town and the District.

No single elementary school in the District has sufficient capacity to accommodate all of the District’s grade PK – 5 students, based upon today’s standards of square footage needs per student. The choice of which existing schools to retain and which to close reflects a combination of size and location. BSE, as the District’s largest and most centrally located school, is a logical choice, as is Sanderson Academy. Sanderson has an instructional capacity of 225 students vs. Colrain’s 175 and is also more centrally located within the District. Transporting students to Colrain from Plainfield and parts of Ashfield likely would result in excessive time-on-bus, particularly for younger students.

The issue of capacity at BSE is one that will bear watching in planning the implementation of this phase. Over the past 5 years, enrollment at BSE has grown from 212 to 263, or almost 25%, largely as a result of higher PK enrollment. Assuming the current number of Colrain PK-5 students were to attend BSE, the combined total number of PK-5 students (344) could bring BSE to near its maximum capacity. In that event, the School Committee should consider proposing that some students from Buckland who live geographically closer to Sanderson than to BSE be “re-districted” to attend Sanderson. This would require the approval of Town meeting voters in Buckland, Shelburne, Ashfield and Plainfield.

As part of the BEST Committee’s overall analyses, the Transportation Subcommittee spent considerable time looking at existing bus routes to determine whether, if at all, it might be generally more cost-effective to assign students to the school nearest their home rather than simply by their town of residence. While the Subcommittee found some cases where individual students attend a school geographically farther from their homes, it not did find enough such students in any specific area to warrant “re-districting” of those students at this time.

In planning for implementation of Phase 3, BEST believes it will be essential to view this transition not as the integration of Colrain students into BSE (and potentially some

Buckland students into Sanderson), but rather as the creation of two new learning communities. All of our District elementary schools have a variety of time-honored traditions as well as unique cultures that should be shared, not lost. One path to achieving this end may be to re-name BSE to clearly acknowledge a new shared beginning.

### **Ongoing**

*Develop in concert with all MTRSD constituencies (town officials, taxpayers, parents, students, staff, administrators, and School Committee) a clear educational vision and mission for the District that emphasizes educational excellence and positions MTRSD as the most attractive alternative in the region for students with a broad range of aspirations.*

As the District moves to implement (and periodically re-evaluate) these recommendations, we must be guided by a clear educational vision and mission: how do we, as a District and as a community, want to teach and to learn. Creating this vision is a goal currently shared by the School Committee and the Superintendent for 2016-17, and one that needs to be shared more broadly as well – by parents, other administrators, educators, parents and taxpayers, all of whom have a tremendous investment in our students' education.

This vision may be reflected in many ways. For instance, with the Middle School expansion, 6th-grade students will have significantly increased educational, social, and extra-curricular opportunities. Educators will have an opportunity to co-create with students, parents, and community members an environment that is academically challenging, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable for our middle school students.

Connecting students to their learning and their learning to their community may be another aspect of this vision. This year, Mohawk received a planning grant to design an agriculture program for the Middle School, providing an opportunity to integrate a hands-on, culturally relevant and rural-centric curriculum into our academic, vocational and extra-curricular programs. The new civics frameworks (coming soon from the state) might offer students a pathway to engage directly with their local town and town officials to understand real issues and effect real change (authentic learning) and then communicate these findings more broadly in person and via technology at the state, national, and even international level.

The re-visioning process for the District is just now beginning. In the coming months, there will be multiple opportunities for all MTRSD constituencies to contribute their thoughts and ideas. As we seek community support to dramatically reshape our District operationally, it will be critical that we do so pursuant to an educational vision that our communities can support as well.

*Work closely with the Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition to further a legislative agenda that addresses the revenue challenges faced by rural schools.*

The BEST Committee believes that close cooperation with the Massachusetts Rural School Coalition offers the best near-term opportunity to secure additional desperately needed state funding for the Mohawk District. The Coalition was formed in the spring of 2016 and has grown rapidly, with more than 50 rural school districts participating in the group's meetings. With the strong support of Mass. Senate President Stan Rosenberg and Mass. Representative Steve Kulik, Chair of the Mass. House Ways and Means Committee, the Coalition expects legislation to provide aid to rural districts will be introduced in early 2017. It will be essential for all parts of the Mohawk community – students, educators, parents, School Committee, Member Town officials and taxpayers – to lobby collectively and effectively for this legislation. The Coalition's "Proposal to Establish Rural School Aid" is available at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd04>.

*Identify opportunities to reduce transportation expenses, particularly after June 30, 2019 (when the existing bus contract expires).*

Over the past nine months, the BEST Transportation Subcommittee, in conjunction with the School Committee's Two-District Transportation Subcommittee, has explored a variety of ways to reduce transportation costs. (Read the Transportation Subcommittee's full report at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd05>) The Subcommittee identified several promising options that require additional study and analysis. Among these are: 1) the direct purchase of fuel by the District, which would save not only fuel excise taxes (because the District is tax-exempt) but also eliminate the contractor's mark-up on its after-tax fuel costs; and 2) the direct ownership and management of the District bus fleet, which would allow for maximum flexibility with respect to routes, drivers and other cost factors. With School Committee approval, the Two-District Transportation Subcommittee will continue to explore these and other options that may arise as/if the BEST recommendations are implemented.

*Identify and take advantage of opportunities to share personnel and resources with neighboring districts in ways that further our educational goals while increasing operational efficiency.*

Virtually all of the rural school districts in Massachusetts are facing the same challenges as the Mohawk District. Over the long-term, the BEST Committee believes it will be vital to work with other districts in our area to identify ways to share resources and control expenses. Among the sectors that might be explored are: administration (superintendents, business managers, curriculum coordinators, payroll and back-office support); transportation (multi-district transportation contracts); purchasing of materials, supplies and services; and educational programming (shared or coordinated course offerings or programs of study).

*Create an alumni network to maintain enthusiasm for MTRSD and fundraise for key initiatives.*

Pressed for time and resources, the BEST Revenue and Fundraising Subcommittee was able to take only very initial steps toward creation of a well-functioning alumni/ae organization. (Read the Subcommittee's report at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd09>.) The Mohawk District is very fortunate to have many extremely loyal graduates – locally and across the country – who have willingly volunteered their time and money to support the District's schools and extra-curricular activities. A concerted effort should be made to communicate systematically with graduates about school activities; to regularly invite local graduates to school events; to organize alumnae/i activities; and to solicit graduates' support as volunteers for and donors to fund-raising events and initiatives.

### **Longer Term**

**NOTE: The BEST Committee's original recommendations anticipated completing an assessment of the feasibility of creating a single, centralized PK-12 campus by December 2017. It was the Committee's conclusion that such centralization likely offered the highest level of operating efficiency and the most long-term operational savings – if it were financially feasible for our District Towns. However, following a series of community meetings to discuss the recommendations, it was clear that centralization was being viewed as BEST's "preferred" final result. This perception had the effect of clouding the public's consideration of Phases 1-3 independent of any potential centralization plan. As a result, on January 10, 2017, the BEST Committee voted to de-emphasize centralization by making it clear that the Committee viewed this option as a longer-term possibility to be considered following the implementation of Phases 1-3 if further consolidation should appear necessary. The discussion below reflects this change.**

*If, following the completion of Phases 1-3, it appears necessary to consider further consolidation options, the BEST Committee recommends that the School Committee then consider commission of an in-depth analysis of the financial feasibility of constructing a single, centrally located elementary school as a way to maximize operational efficiencies and attain the educational advantages inherent in having all resources in a central location.*

The BEST Committee believes that over the long term, the most financially efficient and educationally advantageous path to sustainability may well be to centralize all levels of educational programming in a single location on the existing Mohawk campus. Doing so would require the construction of a new school (or wing) for elementary grades PK-5.

The advantages of consolidating educational resources and programming are many. Most importantly, consolidation would allow for more robust educational offerings at

the elementary level. Currently, many of the District's resources (such as related arts teachers, reading and math specialists, nurses and Certified SPED specialists) are either part-time employees or are shared across schools. In a centralized setting, all of these resources would be available to all students at all times, eliminating the loss of time spent travelling between schools or the difficulties of being able to work with only a few students for short periods. Moreover, all students and families could take advantage of the high-quality before- and after-school programs that are now offered only at schools with sufficient demand (and resources). There would also be far greater opportunities for educators to collaborate with one another – sharing best practices, reviewing and selecting educational materials, writing/ revising curricula and developing activities that engage students across all grade levels. Finally, a new building would give all classrooms access to advanced technology for teaching and learning.

Socially, many students also would benefit from exposure to a broader peer group of students. While small schools with small class sizes do offer some benefits, this format also means that students stay with only the same small group of classmates throughout their elementary years, making it hard for some to find friends “like me” and making the transition to a relatively “large” middle school environment more difficult.

In addition to the educational and social benefits, consolidation would allow the District much higher operational efficiency. Student/teacher ratios could be optimized (our scenarios have assumed no more than 25 per classroom for Grades K-5). Fewer administrative resources, such as principals, secretaries, custodians and food service personnel would be required. And, in a newly constructed facility, the District would benefit from more efficient, state-of-the-art infrastructure that would lower ongoing energy costs.

The primary obstacle to construction of a new elementary facility is, of course, cost. The most recent comparable new elementary school constructed in the state is the Riverbend Elementary School in the Athol-Royalston District in central Massachusetts. This new, 95,726-square-foot school was built to serve 545 students, which is quite comparable to the 556 students currently enrolled in District elementary schools, at a total cost of \$43.9 million. Approximately 63% of this amount, or \$27.6 million, was funded by the Massachusetts School Building Authority. More information on the Riverbend project can be found at [http://arrsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Community\\_Presentation\\_20May13.pdf](http://arrsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Community_Presentation_20May13.pdf)

Based on the Athol-Royalston experience and the proportion of funding MSBA has provided for previous Mohawk District capital projects, the District estimates the maximum MSBA might provide toward a new, centralized Mohawk elementary school would be between \$21.1 - \$24.6 million. This would leave a gap of between

\$19.3 - \$22.8 million to be funded by District borrowing. Assuming a \$20 million bond, at 4.0% interest over a 25-year term, the annual payment to be funded by District towns would be \$1.28 million. Balanced against the cost of a new facility would be the ongoing costs of maintaining our existing aging buildings. Over the past three years, District Towns have approved borrowing approximately \$830,000 for capital projects at our elementary schools, or about \$277,000 per year.

In order to more thoroughly understand the costs of constructing a centralized elementary school, BEST recommends that the School Committee consider retaining an outside firm to complete a thorough feasibility study of centralized options if, after implementation of Phases 1 – 3, it appears necessary to consider further consolidation. Such a review should cover not only construction of a new, separate school at Mohawk, but also viable alternative options, such as adding a new elementary wing at Mohawk or renovating and expanding BSE, which could be less costly.

#### IV. A FINAL NOTE

As the entire Mohawk community reflects on and reacts to this BEST report and recommendations, we believe it will be critical for everyone to keep in mind these fundamental propositions:

- We are all in this together.
- Reducing operating costs alone will not solve the problem.
- **Nothing** can be implemented without the **unanimous** consent of all District Towns.
- The status quo is unacceptable.