

# **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

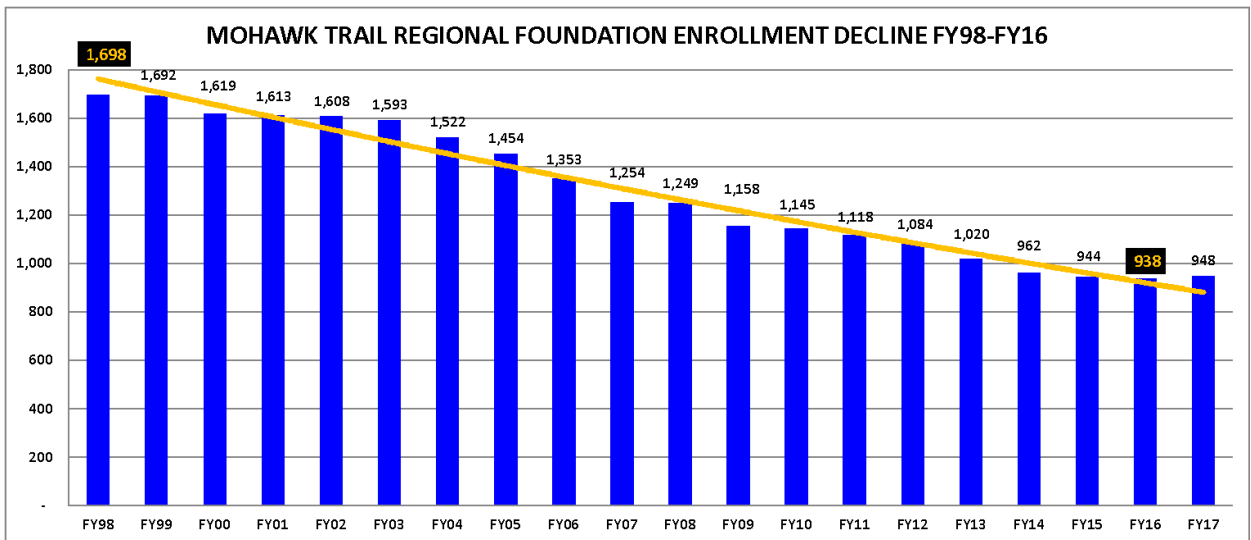
(Colrain), and Hawlemont Elementary (Charlemont, Hawley and Heath) during December 2016 and January 2017.

**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.

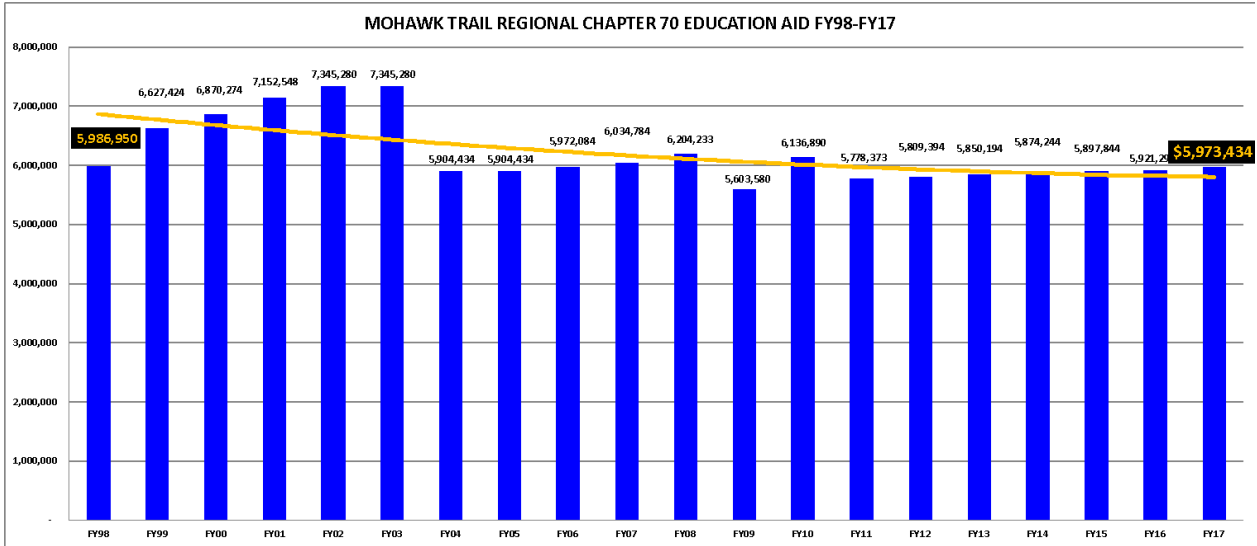
**Figure 1**



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**

**AS OF OCT. 1: NO. OF STUDENTS**

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.

## **BEST Communication Subcommittee Final Summary**

**December 1, 2016**

**Members of the Communication Subcommittee:** Karen Blom, Chair; Glenn Cardinal; Mick Comstock; Sue Mitchell; John Payne; Sarah Reynolds; Leslie Rule; Willow Cohen (to July 2016)

### **Purpose of the Subcommittee**

In an effort to reduce the \$1.25 million per year the Mohawk District spends to send local students to charter and “choice” alternatives, The BEST Communication subcommittee has worked with principals and administrators to begin systematically gathering and analyzing information from students and their parents about why they choose to leave the District. A school “climate” survey was done to identify potential issues and opportunities. The next step is to use this data to refine curriculum choices and school practices. BEST also has developed and distributed materials for more effective “marketing” of District schools to new residents as well as existing students and parents.

### **Materials Created**

February — Created BEST vision statement, set up of subcommittees, established long-term and short-term goals.

March — Created outreach and marketing plan, planned for special town meetings prior to spring annual town meetings in each town. Created master list of all kids in district for use in surveys and to create dialogue with families. Established need for principals to do exit interviews when students leave district.

April — Created specialized marketing brochures for [BSE](#), [Sanderson](#), [Colrain](#), [Heath](#) and Mohawk [Middle/High School](#) outlining the qualities of each school; Created Facebook pages for each school with each principal.

May — Found corporate sponsor to fund printing of 600 brochures which were distributed to key locations in West County where interested parents and students frequent (banks, town offices, POs, real estate offices, visitor centers) and at each school. Created and distributed 100 [posters](#) for wider distribution in Franklin County.

June — Discussed Mohawk website changes to be more inviting to perspective families

July — Established marketing budget line item to be funded by business donations; used feedback from June parent meeting to analyze draft scenarios; finished distribution of posters. Led discussion on needed changes to the website to entice parents to consider Mohawk when evaluating educational options.

August — Met with co-principals of Mohawk to discuss ways to involve students in marketing the district and email communications with parents. Met with senior capstone advisor, Bobby Story to explore ways students could create a photo archive and video on why students love Mohawk for the website. Met with district web tech, Virginia Wiswell to discuss how to change the website with an “apply here” button or link to take people to page the sells Mohawk.

September — Found business sponsors to reprint 200 Mohawk and 100 more BSE brochures

October— Analyzed staff feedback from Sept meetings. Met with district attorney to assess building use by towns. Continued to assess the scenarios with the wider BEST committee.

November — Disseminated information on BEST proposal and developed communication outreach plan in preparation for district and town meetings in Dec and Jan.

### **Next steps**

Work that still needs to be completed includes:

- Outreach to staff, families and community as BEST proposal moves forward
- Changes to the district and school websites or new pages that are more user friendly and welcoming to families deciding where to educate their children.
- Develop a student-produced marketing video to go on new web pages that depicts the attributes of going to school in the district - Why come to Mohawk, what sets the district apart from other local educational options?
- Have students create an image database to be used on the websites.
- Continue to edit and distribute brochures and posters in the area, especially at spring school open houses.
- Follow up on principal exit interviews to determine why students leave the district.
- Provide communication with key constituents as BEST recommendations are phased in over time.
- Edit marketing materials as changes in the district occur.

## **BEST Education Subcommittee Final Summary**

### **December 1, 2016**

**Members of the Education Subcommittee:** Martha Thurber/Chair, Kate Barrows, Leslie Rule

#### **Purpose of the Subcommittee**

The BEST Education Subcommittee was tasked with partnering with the District Leadership team to ensure that any recommendations were driven first and foremost by sound educational reasons and the best interests of the students, family, and the larger community. This partnership facilitated stakeholder participation, input, and refinement as the BEST Committee researched the education benefits and challenges of school consolidation and grade configurations.

In March, the BEST Education Subcommittee consulted with the District Leadership team on implementing “marketing” ideas generated by the BEST Communications Subcommittee. At this time, initial grade reconfiguration proposals developed by the BEST Facilities and Finance sub-committee were also presented to the District Leadership team for feedback.

Throughout March, April and May, the Committee researched grade configuration for elementary, middle, and high schools. Aware of the scenarios being vetted by the Finance and Facilities Sub-Committee, we elected to focus on the expansion of the Middle School to include 6th grade. To broaden our understanding, we invited the community, especially the parents, to help us think through the process and flag concerns.

On June 9, BEST Education Subcommittee held a series of focus group discussions with Mohawk parents to explore expanding Middle School to include 6th grade, and moving it to the Mohawk campus. We compiled the feedback from the nearly 35 parents and concerned stakeholders who attended the sessions. A Findings Report from those sessions was presented to the full BEST committee on June 26.

Also, the BEST and the District Leadership Team held an information session with teachers on Sept 21 to solicit their input on the opportunities and challenges provided by each of the 4 grade configurations. These configurations were: Pre-K only; Pre-K to 2 in a separate early education center; Grades 3-5 at BSE; and the Middle School Expansion to include 6th grade). Feedback from all these sessions were integral as we

evaluated potential scenarios; these sessions shaped the list of grade configuration recommendations submitted to the School Committee.

### **Materials created**

March — BEST Website built to disseminate information and house data, including meeting notes, research, and community updates.

June — Focus Group/Research Findings Report

August — Comments from teachers on each grade configuration were transcribed verbatim so as not to overlook any contributions

### **Next Steps**

- Consolidate resources and materials on middle school grade configuration and transition from middle school to high school
- Advocate for a Task Force, comprised of parents, teachers, students, administrators, and community members to oversee the expansion of middle school
- Support School Committee outreach as it discusses its recommendations at public meetings and information sessions

## **BEST Facilities and Finances Subcommittee Final Summary December 1, 2016**

**Members of the Facilities and Finance Subcommittee:** Lark Thwing, Chair; John Payne; Martha Thurber; Michael Buoniconti, MTRSD Superintendent; and Mike Kociela MTRSD Business Administrator.

### **Purpose of the Subcommittee**

The BEST Finance & Facilities Subcommittee was charged with developing and analyzing alternative operating models for educating District students (including buildings and grade configurations). The current operating model, with four PK-6 elementary schools with uneven enrollment and an under-utilized middle school/high school campus is inefficient and financially unsustainable for Mohawk District towns. The Subcommittee's goal was to identify operating options that would meet or exceed the District's educational goals while also allowing for more efficient use of scarce financial resources.

The Subcommittee generally met weekly or bi-weekly between February and November 2016. Nine different scenarios were developed and analyzed. Because personnel costs (compensation and benefits) accounts for approximately 72% of the District's operating expenses, the Subcommittee's initial analyses focused on savings to be achieved through consolidation and the more efficient use of personnel. If this initial review indicated significant savings, the analysis was extended to include all other key expense line items.

### **Materials Created**

The Subcommittee reviewed financial analyses prepared by Mike Kociela for each scenario considered. In reviewing these analyses, the Subcommittee used a uniform methodology:

- Enrollment – Existing enrollment and class sizes were allocated across the building configuration assumed under the scenario.
- Staffing – Staffing levels were adjusted consistent with the revised building and classroom configuration.
- Personnel and other operational costs were adjusted accordingly.
- Total operating costs under the assumed scenario were then compared to the District's current FY17 budget to assess the level of savings to be achieved.

An overview of the Scenarios analyzed is attached.



### **Next steps**

Over the next 12 months, the Facilities & Finance Subcommittee will continue its work, with a focus on assessing the feasibility of centralizing all elementary grades in a single location. We expect to consider the relative costs of 1) constructing a new PK-5 elementary school on the existing Mohawk campus; 2) constructing a new PK-5 elementary wing at Mohawk, which potentially also would involve renovations to allow for the sharing of some physical spaces (e.g., cafeteria, library, and/or administrative offices); and 3) renovating BSE to accommodate all PK-5 students. Among the key issues to be addressed are the estimated cost of construction/renovation; the likelihood that the Massachusetts School Building Administration would provide a substantial portion of these costs and what amount might the MSBA provide; and, even with MSBA funding, would the remaining costs be affordable to District towns.

### **Update (January 10, 2016)**

In light of feedback received at various public meetings held to discuss the BEST Committee's recommendations, the Committee has voted to modify the its recommendation to de-emphasize the "centralized option." by eliminating that option as "Phase 4" and instead making it a long-term consideration in the event there is a need for further consolidation after completion of Phases 1-3.

## OPERATING SCENARIO REVIEW

Over the past ten months, BEST generated and reviewed nine scenarios representing different combinations of school facilities/grade configurations at some or all of the five schools currently owned or leased by the District: Mohawk High School/Middle School (Buckland); Buckland Shelburne Elementary School (Shelburne Falls); Colrain Central School (Colrain); Heath Elementary School (Heath), and Sanderson Academy (Ashfield). The goal was to identify which alternatives offered the highest level of operational savings vs. our existing operational configuration (*i.e.*, Grades PK – 6 at all elementary schools and Grades 7-12 at Mohawk) while maintaining the highest possible educational quality. Each analysis was approached using the same basic assumptions, including:

**Enrollment** – During the winter and spring of 2016, we used actual enrollment at each grade level within each District school as of January 1, 2016, in our analyses. Beginning in the fall of 2016, scenarios selected for more in-depth analysis utilized actual enrollment as of September 1, 2016. We made no estimates of projected enrollments.

MOHAWK FY17 ENROLLMENT CURRENT AS OF 9/1/16																Students	Classroom Teachers	Student Capacity
	PK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12				
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	

**Staffing** – Staffing assumptions were based on actual staffing for the 2015-16 school year (FY16). Again, to the extent scenarios were selected for more in-depth analysis, actual staffing as of September 1, 2016 was used. We then estimated the staffing that would be required to provide the current level of educational services to the current number of students, but using the alternative operational configuration being analyzed. We also accounted for the estimated increases in unemployment insurance premiums and other costs associated with staff reductions. Staffing costs (salaries and benefits) account for over 70% of the District’s annual operating budget.

**Operating costs** – In order to allow for an “apples to apples” comparison of operating costs, we looked at what operating costs would be given the configuration and staffing assumptions of each particular scenario and compared those costs to the budgeted costs for providing those same services under the FY 17 Mohawk District budget approved by towns. (The FY 17 budget covers period July 1, 2016 – June 30, 2017, or essentially the 2016-17 school year.)

**Capital Costs** – Our analysis did not include approved or anticipated capital costs, *i.e.*, the financing of major repairs to our existing buildings or the cost of any contemplated renovations or new construction. These costs were considered separately, where appropriate, but not as part of the operating cost analyses.

**Transportation** – Our analysis did not project any change in transportation costs. Our existing bus contract runs through June 30, 2019. While we expect to discuss potential near-term

changes with the contractor, and will continue to explore alternative transportation scenarios, we have little confidence that significant changes/reductions can be achieved prior to the end of the existing contract.

**Heath** – The efforts of the Heath Education Task Force, which were occurring separately but simultaneously with those of BEST, added a complicating factor. Aware that the Task Force was considering some options under which Heath’s PK-6 students would be educated outside of the MTRSD, BEST was faced with the challenge of whether to include or exclude those students (and related revenues and costs) in our own analyses. Ultimately, BEST prepared four different analyses that assumed Heath students were educated elsewhere (Scenarios #3, #3A, #4 and #7). The remaining five scenarios included Heath students. These are separately identified in the discussion that follows. **Except as otherwise noted, all savings projected are gross of any costs associated with the education of Heath students outside of the MTRSD.**

### **SCENARIOS #1 and #2**

Recognizing the historical importance of our local elementary schools as centers of town civic life and culture, our first analyses were designed to determine whether any significant level of savings might be achieved if the District were to retain at least some educational presence at each existing elementary school.

#### **Scenario #1**

- Grades PK - 2 retained at all District elementary schools
- All Grades 3-5 consolidated at BSE only
- All Grades 6 transitioned to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$530,000**

#### ***Key Advantages:***

- Keeps youngest children close to home while allowing for consolidation among other grades
- Maintains all existing schools while allowing some efficiencies
- Modest level of savings

#### ***Key Disadvantages:***

- Isolation of early education professionals, with no economies of scale/sharing of resources
- Splitting of siblings among schools causes difficulty for families and younger students
- Lack of upper-grade role models for younger students
- Lack of broad-based educator support

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #1																	
	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								47	78	93					218	13.0	240
BSE	16	19	16	19	20	21	18								327	18.0	350
	16	18	16	19	19	21	17										
	16				19	20	17										
SANDERSON	15	20	12	18											95	6.0	225
	15																
	15																
COLRAIN	15	14	19	19											67	4.0	175
HEATH	12		8												20	2.0	115
TOTALS PK-12	108	71	63	75	0	0	0	47	78	93	58	67	69	64	985	59.5	1665

**KEY ASSUMPTIONS**

Interventionists: 6.9

Related Arts: 2.1 Art Teacher, 2.1 Music Teacher, 2.1 Physical Education Teacher

SPED Services: 4.25

1 Para per classroom + 8 1:1 = 37

BSE: 1 Principal, 1 Assistant Principal, 1 Nurse, 1.5 Building Secretary, 2 Cafeteria, 2 Custodians

Sanderson: 1 Principal, 0.75 Nurse, 0.75 Building Secretary, 1 Cafeteria, 1 Custodian

Colrain: 0.75 Principal, 0.5 Nurse, 0.5 Building Secretary, 0.75 Cafeteria, 0.75 Custodian

Heath: 0.5 Principal, 0.5 Nurse, 0.5 Building Secretary, 0.5 Cafeteria, 0.5 Custodian

**Scenario # 2**

- PK retained at all elementary schools
- Grades K-5 consolidated at BSE and Sanderson
- All Grades 6 transitioned to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$680,000**

**Key Advantages:**

- Keeps very youngest children close to home while allowing for consolidation among other grades
- Maintains some educational presence at all existing schools
- Medium level of savings

**Key Disadvantages:**

- Isolation of PK professionals and viability of a "true" PK program vs. "daycare"
- Splitting of siblings among schools causes difficulty for families and younger students
- Lack of upper-grade role models for younger students
- Virtually no support among educators for PK-only options

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #2																	
	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								47	78	93					218	13.0	240
BSE	16	19	19	20	22	23	21								350	18.0	300
	16	19	19	20	22	22	20										
	16	18	19	19													
SANDERSON	15	20	12	18	14	17	11								137	9.0	225
	15																
	15																
COLRAIN	15														15	1.0	175
HEATH	7														7	1.0	115
TOTALS PK-12	115	76	69	77	58	62	52	47	78	93	58	67	69	64	985	58.5	1665

KEY ASSUMPTIONS
Interventionists: 6.9
Related Arts: 2.1 Art Teacher, 2.1 Music Teacher, 2.1 Physical Education Teacher
SPED Services: 4.25
1 Para per classroom + 8 1:1 = 37
BSE: 1 Principal, 1 Assistant Principal, 1 Nurse, 1 Building Secretary, 2 Cafeteria, 2 Custodians
Sanderson: 1 Principal, 1 Nurse, 1 Building Secretary, 1 Cafeteria, 1 Custodian
Colrain: 0.25 Principal/ 0.25 Building Secretary/ 0.25 Nurse/ 0.25 Custodian
Heath: 0.25 Principal/ 0.25 Building Secretary/ 0.25 Nurse/ 0.25 Custodian

### Conclusion: Scenarios #1 and #2 – Not recommended

After reviewing these options, the Committee was unable to support keeping even a reduced educational presence at all schools. The amount of savings generated through consolidation of only certain grades is insufficient, particularly under Scenario #1, and would be quickly consumed by rising costs within only a few years. While retention of a PK-only program at all schools generated slightly more savings, educators were overwhelmingly opposed to separating PK from other elementary grades. The District has developed an effective PK program that goes well beyond simple “daycare,” and key elements of this program rely on positive interaction between PK students and their older counterparts, as well as resource sharing and collaboration among PK and elementary educators.

### SCENARIOS #3, #4 and #7

Contemporaneous with the efforts of the BEST Committee, the Heath Education Task Force was working to assess various options for educating Heath’s PK-6 students. In late November 2016, after considering a variety of options, the Heath Education Task Force 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. Heath would continue to pay its operating assessment to the MTRSD and Mohawk would pay tuition for Heath students to the receiving school. The Mohawk District and the Town of Heath are currently discussing the feasibility of such an arrangement, which would require the approval of all District Towns, as well as the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Aware of the ongoing efforts of the Heath Task Force, the BEST Committee developed Scenarios #3, #4 and #7 to assess the impact of a potential decision by Heath to educate the town's PK-6 students outside of the District. Each of these scenarios was designed to determine what level of elementary programs (PK-only, PK-2 or PK-5) might sustainably be operated at BSE, Sanderson and or Colrain if the Heath School were closed and Heath's elementary students were to exit the District. The financial impact of educating Heath's PK-6 students outside of the District was considered in these analyses.

**Scenario #3**

- Heath School closes and Heath elects to send the town's PK-6 students outside the District
- PK only remains at Colrain
- BSE and Sanderson offer PK - 5
- All Grades 6 students transition to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$968,000, less tuition costs for Heath students**

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #3																	
	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								46	78	93					217	13.0	240
BSE	16	17	17	19	21	22	19								329	18.0	350
	16	17	17	19	21	21	18										
	16	17	17	19													
SANDERSON	15	20	12	18	14	17	11								137	8.0	225
	15																
	15																
COLRAIN	15														15	1.0	175
<b>TOTALS PK-12</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>56.5</b>	<b>1550</b>

KEY STAFFING ASSUMPTIONS
Interventionists: 6.9
Related Arts: 2 Art Teacher, 2 Music Teacher, 2 Physical Education Teacher
SPED Services: 4
1 Para per classroom + 8 1:1 = 35
BSE: 1 Principal, 1 Assistant Principal, 1 Nurse, 1.5 Building Secretary, 2 Cafeteria, 2 Custodians
Sanderson: 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Nurse, 1.0 Building Secretary, 1.0 Cafeteria, 1.0 Custodian
Colrain: 0.25 Principal/ 0.25 Building Secretary/ 0.25 Nurse/ 0.25 Custodian

**Key Advantages:**

- Keeps very youngest Colrain children close to home while allowing for upper grade consolidation
- Maintains some educational presence in Colrain
- Potentially attractive level of savings, offset by the cost of educating Heath students outside of the District

**Key Disadvantages:**

- Isolation of PK professionals and viability of a “true” PK program in Colrain vs. “daycare”
- Lack of upper-grade role models for younger Colrain students
- Virtually no support among educators for PK-only options

**Scenario #4**

- Heath School closes and Heath elects to send the town’s PK-6 students outside the District
- Grades PK to 2 only at Sanderson and Colrain
- BSE offers PK - 2 and consolidated Grades 3-5
- All Grades 6 students transition to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$1,000,000, less tuition costs for Heath students**

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #4																	
	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								46	78	93					217	13.0	240
BSE	16	19	16	19	19	20	16								319	18.0	350
	16	18	16	19	19	20	16										
	16				18	20	16										
SANDERSON	15	20	12	18											95	6.0	225
	15																
	15																
COLRAIN	15	14	19	19											67	4.0	175
<b>TOTALS PK-12</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>57.5</b>	<b>1550</b>

KEY ASSUMPTIONS
Interventionists: 6.9
Related Arts: 2 Art Teacher, 2 Music Teacher, 2 Physical Education Teacher
SPED Services: 4
1 Para per classroom + 8 1:1 = 34
BSE: 1 Principal, 1 Assistant Principal, 1 Nurse, 1 Building Secretary, 2 Cafeteria, 2 Custodians
Sanderson: 1 Principal, 0.75 Nurse, 0.75 Building Secretary, 1 Cafeteria, 1 Custodian
Colrain: 0.75 Principal, 0.5 Nurse, 0.5 Building Secretary, 0.75 Cafeteria, 0.75 Custodian

**Key Advantages:**

- Keeps youngest children close to home while allowing for consolidation among other grades
- Maintains educational presence at Colrain and Sanderson while allowing some efficiencies in higher grades
- Potentially attractive level of savings, offset by the cost of educating Heath students outside of the District

**Key Disadvantages:**

- Isolation of early education professionals, with no economies of scale/sharing of resources
- Splitting of siblings among schools difficult for families and students
- Lack of upper-grade role models for younger students at Colrain and Sanderson

**Conclusion: Scenarios #3 and #4 – Not recommended**

Our review of these options indicated that while the savings generated were potentially higher than the savings under Scenarios #1 and #2, Scenarios #3 and #4 suffered from the same issues as those options: the inherent disadvantages from an educational perspective, of segregating the lower and upper elementary grades. Given these disadvantages, particularly as strongly expressed by the District’s elementary educators, we felt other options provided similar savings with fewer educational disadvantages.

**Scenario #7**

- Heath School closes and Heath elects to send the town’s PK-6 students outside the District
- Grades pre-K to 5 remain at Colrain, Sanderson and BSE
- All Grades 6 students transition to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #7																Students	Classroom Teachers	Student Capacity
	PK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12				
HIGH SCHOOL											58	67	69	64	258	16.5	560	
MIDDLE SCHOOL								46	78	93					217	13.0	240	
BSE	16	19	16	19	17	15	20								238	14.0	350	
	16	18	16	19	16	15												
	16																	
SANDERSON	15	20	12	18	14	17	11								137	9.0	225	
	15																	
	15																	
COLRAIN	15	14	19	19	9	13	17								106	7.0	175	
<b>TOTALS PK-12</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>59.5</b>	<b>1550</b>	

KEY STAFFING ASSUMPTIONS
Interventionists: 6.9
Related Arts: 2.0 Art Teacher, 2.0 Music Teacher, 2.0 Physical Education Teacher
SPED Services: 4.0
1.0 Para per classroom + 8.0 1:1 = 35.0
BSE: 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Assistant Principal, 1.0 Nurse, 1.5 Building Secretary, 2.0 Cafeteria, 2.0 Custodians
Sanderson: 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Nurse, 1.0 Building Secretary, 1.0 Cafeteria, 1.0 Custodian
Colrain: 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Nurse, 1.0 Building Secretary, 1.0 Cafeteria, 1.0 Custodian

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$682,000, less cost of tuition for Heath students**

**Key Advantages:**

- Maintains strong educational presence at all remaining elementary schools
- Avoids potential splitting of siblings into different schools

**Key Issues:**

- Limited savings relative to other options
- No long-term economies of scale

**Conclusion: Not Recommended**



Because a preliminary analysis of this scenario indicated limited savings, it was not reviewed in depth. It was clear that the closure of Heath alone, combined with consolidation of Grade 6 students at Mohawk, would not produce sufficient savings to have a meaningful impact on the District's sustainability.

The next step in our process was to assess the impact of closing Colrain Central School in combination with a decision by Heath to educate its PK-6 students outside of the District. In essence, this Scenario is the same as Scenario #3, but without maintaining a PK presence in Colrain.

**SCENARIO #3A**

- Heath School closes and Heath elects to send the town's PK-6 students outside the District
- Colrain Central School closes
- All Grades PK to 5 consolidated at BSE and Sanderson
- All Grades 6 students transition to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #3A																	
	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								46	78	93					217	13.0	240
BSE	16	17	17	19	21	22	19								344	19.0	350
	16	17	17	19	21	21	18										
	16	17	17	19													
	15																
SANDERSON	15	20	12	18	14	17	11								137	9.0	225
	15																
	15																
<b>TOTALS PK-12</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>956</b>	<b>57.5</b>	<b>1550</b>

KEY STAFFING ASSUMPTIONS
Interventionists: 6.9
Related Arts: 2 Art Teacher, 2 Music Teacher, 2 Physical Education Teacher
SPED Services: 4
1 Para per classroom + 8 1:1 = 35
BSE: 1 Principal, 1 Assistant Principal, 1 Nurse, 1.5 Building Secretary, 2 Cafeteria, 2 Custodians
Sanderson: 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Nurse, 1.0 Building Secretary, 1.0 Cafeteria, 1.0 Custodian

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$1,200,000, less the cost of tuition for Heath students**

**Key Advantages:**

- Achieves greater efficiencies of scale by consolidating all PK-5 students into two elementary schools
- Attractive level of savings

**Key Issues:**

- Colrain loses its local school
- Additional transition for some students
- Potential capacity constraints at BSE

**Conclusion: Recommended as a potential Phase 3**

Scenario #3A offers an attractive level of savings, created through the consolidation of Grades PK-5 into two locations. Because of capacity limitations at BSE, the District’s largest and most centrally located elementary school, this consolidation would not be possible without the expanding the Mohawk Middle School to include 6th grade.

BEST also believes this Scenario offers the potential to achieve some additional savings in transportation if, in cases where there is a clear financial benefit and reduced time on bus, elementary students were assigned to the school closest to their home, regardless of town lines. (These potential savings have not been included in Potential Operating Savings, above.) Therefore, BEST voted to recommend Scenario #3A as Phase 3 of the sustainability plan.

**SCENARIO #5**

- All Grades pre-K to 5 consolidated into a newly constructed centralized facility (or wing) on the Mohawk campus
- All Grades 6 students transition to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$1,230,000\***

\*This scenario assumed Heath students (PK-12) continue to be educated in District schools.

**Key Advantages:**

- Maximizes efficiency of staffing resources by consolidating all grades and student services into a single location
- State-of-the-art infrastructure and operating systems (e.g., heating, lighting) will minimize ongoing operational expenditures
- All towns “share the pain” of closing elementary schools
- Very attractive level of savings

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #5																	
	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								47	78	93					218	13.0	240
CENTRAL ELEMENTARY	17	16	18	20	20	21	18								509	29.0	865
	17	15	17	19	19	21	17										
	17	15	17	19	19	20	17										
	16	15	17	19													
	16	15															
	16																
TOTALS PK-12	115	76	69	77	58	62	52	47	78	93	58	67	69	64	985	58.5	1665

KEY STAFFING ASSUMPTIONS FOR CENTRAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Interventionists (2)
Related Arts Teachers: Art (2), Music (2), Physical Education (2)
Special Education Teachers (4) / Special Education Liaison (1)
Psychologist (1)/ Adjustment Counselor (1)
Speech and Language Pathologists (2)
Occupational Therapist (0.76) / Physical Therapist (0.65)
Paraprofessionals (37) (29 + 8 1:1s)
Principal (1)/ Assistant Principal (1)
Building Secretary (2)
Nurse (1)
Cafeteria (2)
Custodians (2)

**Key Disadvantages:**

- Member towns’ ability to finance the District’s portion of construction costs
- Likelihood and amount of MSBA financing is unknown
- Potential requirement to repay a portion of MSBA contributions to existing facilities

**Conclusion: Recommended as a potential Phase 4, subject to further feasibility analysis**

The BEST Committee believes that over the long term, the most financially efficient and educationally advantageous path toward sustainability would 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 to students of consolidating educational resources and programming are many, as are the operating efficiencies. However, in order to more thoroughly understand the costs of constructing a centralized elementary school, BEST’s Finance & Facilities Subcommittee will seek School Committee approval to complete a thorough feasibility study of centralized options prior to December 31, 2017. We intend the review to consider 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. We will begin shortly to explore ways to fund this critical effort. It will not be funded out of the Mohawk operating budget.

**SCENARIO #6**

- Grades PK to 5 at BSE, Heath, Colrain and Sanderson
- BSE also becomes a Middle School for all Grades 6 to 8
- Mohawk retains Grades 9-12, using former Middle School space for expanded career/ vocational programs

**Projected Operating Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): Preliminary Analysis \$250,000 – \$300,000\***

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #6															Students	Classroom Teachers	Student Capacity
	PK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12			
HIGH SCHOOL											58	67	69	64	258	16.5	560
BSE	16	19	16	19	17	15	20	24	20	24					456	24.0	590
	16	18	16	19	16	15		23	20	23							
	16								19	23							
SANDERSON	15	20	12	18	14	17	11								137	10.0	225
	15																
	15																
COLRAIN	15	14	19	19	9	13	17								106	7.0	175
HEATH		12		8		8									28	3.0	115
<b>TOTALS PK-12</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>985</b>	<b>60.5</b>	<b>1665</b>

KEY ASSUMPTIONS
Interventionists: 6.9
Related Arts: 2.5 Art Teacher, 2.5 Music Teacher, 2.5 Physical Education Teacher
SPED Services: 6.25
1 Para per classroom + 8 1:1 = 50
BSE: 1 Principal, 1 Assistant Principal, 1.5 Nurse, 1.5 Building Secretary, 3 Cafeteria, 2 Custodians
Sanderson: 1 Principal, 1 Nurse, 1 Building Secretary, 1 Cafeteria, 1 Custodian
Colrain: 1 Principal, 1 Nurse, 1 Building Secretary, 1 Cafeteria, 1 Custodian
Heath: 0.5 Principal/ 0.5 Building Secretary/ 0.5 Nurse/ 0.5 Custodian

***Key Advantages:***

- Creation of a true, separate Middle School offers educational advantages
- Allows for enhanced career programming at Mohawk to attract/retain “hands-on” learners
- Maintains significant educational presence at all other elementary schools

***Key Issues:***

- Insignificant savings relative to other options
- BSE lacks sufficient capacity to house a consolidated Grade 6-8 middle school in addition to a PK-5 program
- Existing BSE lacks key middle school requirements such as gym space, locker rooms, *etc.*
- Ability to create vocational program that generates revenue at Mohawk not guaranteed

**Conclusion: Not Recommended**

The BEST Committee considered this option as intuitively attractive because it offered a way to gain the educational benefits offered by a true middle school for Grades 6-8 as well as to provide an expanded vocational and career-training curriculum for Grades 9-12. However, it very quickly became apparent that even the largest of the existing elementary buildings (BSE) lacks the capacity to house both an elementary school and a new middle school. In addition, substantial renovation would be necessary to create gymnasium space, locker rooms, appropriate bathrooms and other features required to meet the needs of middle school students.

**SCENARIO #8**

- All Grades PK-5 at renovated/expanded BSE
- All Grades 6 students transition to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

**Projected Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$1,000.000 (preliminary)**

***Key Advantages:***

- Enhances efficiency of staffing resources by consolidating all elementary grades and student services into a single location
- Very attractive level of savings
- Potentially less expensive than constructing a completely new facility at Mohawk
- Renovation could partially or wholly replace old infrastructure with state-of-the-art systems (*e.g.*, heating, lighting) to minimize long-term operational expenditures

***Key Issues:***

- Renovation costs
- Existing structural issues BSE may make renovation more expensive than new construction
- Likelihood and amount of MSBA financing is unknown
- Potential requirement to repay a portion of MSBA contributions to existing facilities

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #8																	
	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								47	78	93					218	13.0	240
CENTRAL ELEMENTARY @ BSE	16	19	16	19	17	15	20								509	29.0	865
	16	18	16	19	16	15											
	16																
	15	20	12	18	14	17	11										
	15																
	15																
TOTALS PK-12	115	76	69	77	58	62	52	47	78	93	58	67	69	64	985	65.5	1665

KEY STAFFING ASSUMPTIONS FOR CENTRAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Interventionists (2)
Related Arts Teachers: Art (2), Music (2), Physical Education (2)
Special Education Teachers (4) / Special Education Liaison (1)
Psychologist (1)/ Adjustment Counselor (1)
Speech and Language Pathologists (2)
Occupational Therapist (0.76) / Physical Therapist (0.65)
Paraprofessionals (37) (29 + 8 1:1s)
Principal (1)/ Assistant Principal (1)
Building Secretary (2)
Nurse (1)
Cafeteria (2)
Custodians (2)

**Conclusion: Not Recommended, subject to further feasibility analysis**

The BEST Committee considered this option as an alternative to Scenario #5 (building a new centralized elementary school on the Mohawk campus). Our initial analysis indicated that the projected operating savings were slightly lower than under Scenario #5. In addition, renovation/reconstruction of BSE would entail all of the potential downsides of constructing a new facility at Mohawk (e.g., the uncertainty of MSBA funding, affordability for District Towns) and the additional uncertainties inherent in renovating an almost 60-year old building. Furthermore, two architects familiar with the building offered the opinion that building a new facility (at Mohawk or at BSE) would likely be less expensive than trying to renovate the existing structure. Consequently, the BEST Committee voted to recommend Scenario #5 rather than Scenario #8. However, as part of our assessment of the feasibility of a centralized elementary facility, it is our intention to look more in depth at the relative costs of renovation at BSE vs. new construction at Mohawk.

**SCENARIO #9**

- All Grades PK-2 at one Early Learning Center (BSE)
- All Grades 3-5 consolidated at Sanderson
- All Grades 6 students transition to the Mohawk Middle School (Grades 6-12 at Mohawk)

**Projected Savings (vs. FY17 Budget): \$1,100,000**

CLASSROOM CONFIGURATION SCENARIO #9																	
	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								47	78	93					218	13.0	240
BSE					20	21	18								172	9	19.1
					19	21	17										
					19	20	17										
EARLY LEARNING CENTER	17	16	18	20											337	20	16.9
	17	15	17	19													
	17	15	17	19													
	16	15	17	19													
	16	15															
	16																
TOTALS PK-12	115	76	69	77	58	62	52	47	78	93	58	67	69	64	985	58.5	1665
<b>KEY STAFFING ASSUMPTIONS FOR CENTRAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL</b>																	
Interventionists (2)																	
Related Arts Teachers: Art (2), Music (2), Physical Education (2)																	
Special Education Teachers (4) / Special Education Liaison (1)																	
Psychologist (1)/ Adjustment Counselor (1)																	
Speech and Language Pathologists (2)																	
Occupational Therapist (0.76) / Physical Therapist (0.65)																	
Paraprofessionals (37) (29 + 8 1:1s)																	
BSE: 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Nurse, 1.0 Building Secretary, 1.0 Cafeteria, 1.0 Custodians																	
ELC: 1.0 Principal, 1.0 Nurse, 1.0 Building Secretary, 2.0 Cafeteria, 2.0 Custodian																	

**Key Advantages:**

- Consolidated facility focused solely on early learning allows for maximum sharing of professional skills and resources
- Very attractive level of savings
- An Early Learning Center may be attractive to out-of-District parents as the only facility of its kind in the area

**Key Issues:**

- Higher transportation costs and potential time-on-bus issues
- Splitting of siblings among schools difficult for families and students
- Lack of upper-grade role models for younger students

**Conclusion: Not Recommended**

This Scenario also offers an attractive level of operational savings. However, the BEST Committee voted not to recommend this option for several reasons. First, the only District elementary school with sufficient space to accommodate all PK-2 students is BSE. Thus all Grade 3-5 students would be educated at Sanderson (the District’s second largest elementary school), leading to potential time-on-bus issues for students in the more distant reaches of the District. More importantly, PK-2 options in any configuration received little support from the District’s elementary educators. While many saw potential advantages to the concept of an early learning center dedicated to PK-2 (or PK-3) students, they felt these were more than outweighed by the loss of regular interaction with upper elementary students; the potential hardship on families with students in both lower and upper elementary grades; and the likely weakening of PTOs and other parent volunteer efforts that have been important to maintaining the District’s strong elementary schools. The concept of a consolidated early learning center remains attractive and could be integrated into any plan to construct or renovate a centralized elementary campus.

## **BEST Funding and Grants Sub-Committee Report**

Members of the Funding and Grants Subcommittee: Sarah Reynolds, (Charlemont); Sue Mitchell (Mohawk District Education Association Representative)

In an attempt to come up with ways to help with the funding of new programs the District might create and extra classroom items needed for those programs to enhance the education of the district pupils, the subcommittee researched various avenues for grants and different ways of the District might fundraising.

It was suggested that there be an alumni association created to help with the fundraising. BEST members also are developing a website aimed at increasing communication with (and raising funds from) Mohawk alumni/ae. Grants were also explored. Most grants are curriculum/ program specific so need a targeted proposal.

**Guidelines for the creation of an alumni/ae association can be found at <http://bit.ly/mtrsd10>**

### **Next steps**

- We recommend that the District start recruitment for an alumni/ae to lead the association and develop a plan to proceed.
- It is also recommended the district appoint one individual to lead grant applications and investigation into opportunities relevant to the programs and curriculum at Mohawk.

## **BEST Transportation Sub-Committee Report**

Members of the Transportation Subcommittee: David Newell, (Ashfield, Chair); Robin Pease (Mohawk, Secretary); Charles Stetson (Rowe); Heather Davis (Plainfield); Julia Aaron (Charlemont); Erwin Reynolds (Charlemont).

### **Purpose**

In order to attain an improved financial 'sustainability' for the Mohawk Trail Regional School District, the Subcommittee sought ways to contain transportation cost for both the short-term (FY 17-19) and long-term (FY 20 et seq.) and to otherwise reduce the net cost to the member towns for school transportation. A number of general proposals were directed to the Subcommittee for consideration, as well as specific questions relating to various restructuring options.

### **Background**

Mohawk's transportation system covers around 250 square miles in nine towns – the geographically largest academic regional school system in the Commonwealth. Currently, Mohawk utilizes 15 buses, 3 mini-buses, and 6 vans (including 3 transporting to vocational schools). Mohawk presently contracts for transportation services and is now in year 3 of a five year contract that will expire in June 2019. Mohawk's FY 17 transportation budget is \$1,183,021 (roughly 6+% of total budget). In recent years the Commonwealth has reimbursed Mohawk and other districts for slightly over half of total transportation expense. For example, in FY 16, Mohawk received \$708,257 from the state against a FY 15 year budget of \$1,237,814 – roughly 57%. Thus, in order to reduce one dollar of transportation expense assessed to the towns, Mohawk would need to reduce transportation expense by \$2.33, more or less.

The Subcommittee carefully studied the current two-tier system serving Mohawk and its four elementary schools. Over the past 20 years or so, routes have been reduced, and truncated resulting in more students walking to/from bus stops. There is currently a one hour differential between the high school and elementary schools, and some buses have difficulty executing routes within this time limit. Simply put, the current system is about as 'tight' as can be logistically arranged.

### **Recommendation on Route Reductions**

The best way to contain expense is to reduce the number of routes and vehicles serving Mohawk. We carefully studied route consolidations, particularly in the Colrain/Shelburne and Ashfield/Plainfield areas and determined that, while one (and perhaps two) consolidations were logistically possible, they were not desirable or practical. They would require increasing the Mohawk/Elementary time differential, and require some additional pickup location consolidations (with increased walking). The Subcommittee recommends that further route reductions not be considered as these reductions in service would be contradictory to the larger aims and goals established by Mohawk's BEST.



## **Proposals evaluated**

1. PARENT TRANSPORTATION ARRANGEMENTS. 'Parent Arranged Transportation' (PAT's) can sometimes help contain costs, and have been utilized in instances where there is a single child/family involved. Utilizing parents to transport other students is unwise and highly problematic. The Subcommittee recommends that any transportation system arrangement that relies on PAT's not be considered.
2. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON GEOGRAPY. It had been proposed that school assignments based on geographic propinquity rather than town lines might save busing expense. After careful study, we found no such economies would be attained, as total vehicular needs would not be changed, and total mileage/time involved would not be significantly reduced. The only geographic area that seemed to have some potential savings was the East Hawley area reassigned to Sanderson, but upon examination, the savings were minimal to none, and there were legal impediments as two school districts would be involved. The Subcommittee recommends that 'geographic reassignment' not be considered for these economic reasons.
3. BUS STOP 'CLUSTERING'. The Subcommittee studied a proposal calling for fewer bus stops in order to streamline the routes and reduce route times. We found no economic benefit would result from bus stop 'clustering'. For this reason and because such a plan would result in more students walking (and/or walking further), we recommend that it not be implemented.

## **Recommendation Relating to Establishing a 'Municipal Bus Operation'**

The Subcommittee believes that transportation cost could be reduced if the district owned (or leased) and operated a fleet of vehicles, and managed busing services municipally rather than contract for these services. While there are many potential economic benefits to a 'municipal model', we are also aware that there will be some downsides, including costs associated with insurance and retirement benefits that will increase with the addition of around 25 to 27 municipal employees.

We recommend that the Mohawk school committee and administration undertake a thorough study of the economic and other benefits that would be attained were the district to establish a 'municipal system' for transportation. We have a number of related recommendations and observations which we will share with the School Committee should they elect to undertake such a study. The study should be completed by December 2017 so that the district will have ample time to implement such a plan if it opts to go forward.

## **Recommendations Relating to Future Transportation Contracting**

Starting in September 2019, Mohawk will either be operating a municipal system, or will be starting another year of contracted transportation service with a private enterprise. Because Mohawk received only a single bid in 2013 for our current five-year contract, we communicated with all firms who attended the bidders' conference that year to learn why they did not bid, and how the district could modify its specifications to encourage more bidders and contain cost. These findings will be shared with the Mohawk committee. In the event Mohawk elects to continue with contracted services, we have prepared suggestions relating to changes in specifications that we believe will help contain transportation costs.

## **Recommendations Relating to Fuel**

If Mohawk opts to continue with contracted transportation services, we recommend that the district assume responsibility for the purchase of fuel, both diesel and unleaded. One benefit will be the savings in federal excise which Mohawk is exempt from, while the contractors are not. Currently diesel excise is at 24.4 cents/gallon (unleaded at 18.4). Last year, 38,000 gallons of diesel were used to execute the Mohawk bus contract. We estimate the excise tax savings at around \$10,000/year. The greater benefit we see is that, if Mohawk assumes responsibility for the most 'variable' economic factor in preparing a bid for transportation, the contractor will be in a much better position to 'sharpen his/her pencil' in preparing such a bid. And it may encourage more firms to consider bidding. Obviously most of these benefits will be realized should Mohawk opt to establish a 'municipal system'.

We continue to look at this option as both a short-term and long-term option. In either case, we recommend that we rely on the contractor to furnish the fuel depot (tanks, pumps, etc.). Even if Mohawk opts for a 'municipal system', we believe it would be wise to utilize a leased 'fuel depot' rather than construct a municipal 'fuel depot', at least initially. We believe that, if a 'municipal system' is proven to be advantageous, then the construction of a maintenance facility with a 'fuel depot' could be considered – possibly sited on the 7 acre property Mohawk acquired circa 1980 to the north and east of the campus.

## **Restructuring Options**

Other BEST subcommittees asked for guidance on certain models:

1. CONSOLIDATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS TO BSE AND SANDERSON. That would obviously require that current Colrain students likely be bused to BSE. Our Subcommittee determined that this is logistically possible. At issue would be the likely need to increase the 'time differential' (Mohawk/Elementary) by about 15 minutes. If this does not prove acceptable, the 'problem' could be resolved by adding one single-tier bus for BSE only service.

2. HEATH SCHOOL CLOSURE. We assume that Heath students would be bused en bloc to either Hawlemont or Rowe. We believe that busing Heath students to Rowe could be accomplished without any 'difficulties'. It is likely that the busing of Heath students to Hawlemont might result in a need to widen the 'time differential' between Mohawk and Hawlemont. If that proved unacceptable, the 'problem' could be solved by the addition of a single-tier bus.
3. SINGLE ELEMENTARY CAMPUS. We have not given consideration to matters relating to transportation for this option at this time because it has yet to be sufficiently defined and modeled.

#### **NEXT STEPS**

- A more careful review of proposals affecting state reimbursements. We are particularly interested in a 'save harmless' clause in regional transportation reimbursement.
- Completion of discussions with the current contractor regarding possible contract revisions (FY 17-19).
- Continued examination of the possible benefits of a 'municipal system' and preparation of a report relating to the proposed study of this option.
- Ongoing review of specifications in the event Mohawk opts for continuing securing services by contracting.