

**Sustainable Schools:  
Recommendations for the Mohawk Trail Regional  
School District**

A White Paper

Prepared by the  
Mohawk Trail Regional School District Long Range Planning Committee  
A Special Committee of the Mohawk Trail Regional School Committee

January 21, 2015

“With all the pressures coming to bear on our town budgets, we simply HAVE TO EXPLORE options and look at alternatives to business as usual.”

– K-12 Committee on Organization, August 1992

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The major threat to the continued sustainability of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District (MTRSD) comes from an enrollment drop of 45% since 1997. Because of this sharp decrease in the number of students it serves, MTRSD currently operates at 56.8% of instructional capacity. Other major sustainability problems are a Regional Agreement that can be altered only by unanimous vote, and a shortfall of nearly \$1.6 million in state reimbursement of transportation costs between FY 2008 and FY 2013.

Accordingly, the Long Range Planning Committee recommends: (1) finding other uses for the unused space in school buildings; (2) switching to alternative energy sources for heating and electricity; (3) pursuing full state reimbursement of regional transportation costs; (4) conducting, analyzing, and developing student retention action plans based on student exit surveys; (5) advocating for incorporation of a “Rurality” Factor in the Chapter 70 state aid formula; (6) promoting greater first-hand knowledge of MTRSD operations by School Committee members; (7) actively supporting and participating in the effort to bring affordable broadband internet access to member towns; and (8) revising the Regional Agreement.

Recommended changes to the Regional Agreement include adopting a weighted or one vote/one town voting system for all decisions, with two exceptions: the closing of a community’s school and/or the reassignment of any of its students to another school, both of which would require approval of the town in which the school is located. Other recommended changes to the Regional Agreement include: allowing collaborative agreements between towns for sharing educational costs and resources without a vote of unaffected towns, standardizing transportation responsibilities for the MTRSD administration and those towns not part of a regional vocational school district, standardizing pre-K opportunities and costs across the District, and devising policies for making the activities of each Local Education Council more visible to the public.

## Part 1: Introduction

The Mohawk Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) was created at the request of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District (MTRSD) School Committee in Spring 2013 to explore solutions to the long-term sustainability of the District. In order to create local town ownership of the LRPC, the School Committee asked the Select Boards from each member town and the Town of Rowe to appoint representatives to this committee. These appointed stakeholders would study the issues at hand, arrive at sustainable solutions, and make recommendations to the District's School Committee that best represent the interests of their respective towns. Members of the LRPC include Select Board representatives from the towns of Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain, Hawley, Heath, Plainfield, Rowe, and Shelburne:

- Joe Judd (Shelburne Select Board), Chair
- Robert Aeschback (Chair, Mohawk Trail Regional School Committee)
- Beth Bandy (Charlemont Select Board)
- Ron Coler (Ashfield Select Board)
- Robert Dean (former member, Buckland Select Board, Oct. 2013-Jan. 2015)
- Judy Feeley (Plainfield Select Board, alternate)
- Donald Freeman (Heath Finance Committee, Aug. 2014-Jan. 2015)
- Susan Gleason (Rowe Select Board)
- Sheila Litchfield (Heath Select Board, June 2013-Aug. 2014)
- John Sears (Hawley Select Board)
- Larry Shearer (Colrain representative)
- Chris Stockman (Plainfield representative)

We, the representatives listed above, began work in June 2013 and met regularly through January 2015. Our work was guided by this mission statement:

*Mohawk District member towns partnering to explore and communicate to stakeholders the options for a financially sustainable, quality public education for the next 20 years.*

We began by studying the 2007 final report of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District Interim Planning Committee, a multi-town workgroup that previously explored and made recommendations about the District's financial situation. While this background information was useful, we did not wish to duplicate previous efforts.

Instead, we spent much of our time collecting data about the MTRSD that would help us understand the current sustainability challenges it faces. We focused our research on several broad topics, including: transportation, enrollment, educational performance, demographics, unfunded mandates, building design, operational issues, expense evaluation, and debt. We collected data about MTRSD and other schools in the Commonwealth from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Division of Local

Services (DLS). We considered the findings of a 2009 report from the New England School Development Council entitled “Franklin County Schools: A 2020 Vision.” We also compiled demographic data from the United States Census, Town Clerks in the eight MTRSD member towns, and the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The Superintendent’s office provided data sets on request, as well. Resource references can be found at the end of this White Paper in Appendix 3. Links to our sources also are included in our PowerPoint presentation entitled, “MTRSD LRPC,” which is a companion resource to this document.

At each of our meetings, we reviewed new data we had collected, revised our PowerPoint presentation as necessary in light of that data, and identified additional information needed to answer our questions about the District. The data we collected served as the basis for evaluation and discussion, ultimately providing the road map for this document’s recommendations. This process revealed several paths for the School Committee to pursue regarding the District's long-term sustainability.

We held our meetings initially at the Shelburne Town Hall. In the fall of 2013 we began taking our meetings on the road, holding working sessions in each of the District member towns through the winter and into the spring of 2014. We then concluded our work in a series of weekly meetings at the Shelburne Town Hall.

At the time of this writing, we anticipate presenting our findings to the MTRSD School Committee, along with Legislators and local Select Board and Finance Committee members on January 21, 2015.

## **Part 2: Components of sustainability**

The MLRPC took a broad view of the word “sustainability.” We recognized that our schools not only play educational roles, but also have significant social and economic meaning to our communities. As a result, when we set out to look at the long-range sustainability of the District, we did not limit our work to financial aspects of sustainability. Instead, we felt that we needed to explore the social, economic, and educational aspects of the entire School District in order to achieve our mission. Our committee identified the importance of a unified solution taking all three aspects into account. Accordingly, we kept our data evaluation at the District level so as not to pit one school or town against another.

### **Social Components**

#### *Concept of a local school – a sense of place*

There is a strong sense of place attached to our local schools. In addition to being institutions where our children learn, these facilities serve other vital functions in our communities. They are gathering places where community members attend meetings, concerts, plays, and sporting events. They also are places where local residents go to work each day, making the District a significant employer in the region. The introduction of an agricultural curriculum at the Hawlemont School and the construction of buildings to support it demonstrate how a school can energize a community, in this case by drawing on volunteers and other local resources to revitalize the education of its students. Taken together, it is clear that our schools are focal points of community pride and activity.

#### *Population demographics*

The configuration and size of school buildings we currently have in the MTRSD is a reflection of past demographic trends. During the 1970s and 1980s, the populations of the towns in our District grew rapidly and at rates much greater than the statewide average. In the 20 years spanning the census data taken in 1960 and the one taken in 1980, our regional District population grew nearly 20.4%. In this context of two decades of population growth, and with projected continuing growth in District enrollments,<sup>1</sup> the MTRSD undertook school building enhancement projects to accommodate what was expected to be continued population growth.

Contrary to the projections acted upon by MTRSD, the population growth in our area then began to slow down. The 10 years leading up to 2000 saw our area grow by a relatively small 4.7%. The 2000 census data marks the high point for the region’s population. After that, our total population dropped dramatically. Between the years of 2000 and 2010, the total population of the MTRSD member towns dropped by 5.5%.

This downward population trend appears likely to continue. The Donahue Institute recently released population change projections for communities across Massachusetts through 2030. According to that published report, the towns in the MTRSD are projected

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<sup>1</sup> As set forth in *Educational Collaborative Planning Process* (1988), published by the predecessor districts to the Mohawk Trail Regional School District, pp. 12-13.

to experience an additional population drop of 6.8% by 2020 and a further decline of 12.0% by 2030. In total, this represents a projected 22.5% decrease since the population high point documented in the 2000 census.

The same study shows data for Franklin County that makes unlikely any reversal in the foreseeable future. If one looks at data comparing pre-K populations (ages zero to four) and populations older than 60 years of age with the total population, a disturbing trend becomes readily apparent. In 2010, we see that 4.8% of the children are younger than four years of age and 22.9% of the adults are older than 60 years of age. The same Donahue Institute study predicts that by 2030, 3.5% of the children will be younger than four years of age and 39% of the adults will be older than 60 years of age.

Not surprisingly, the population trends for our towns have been mirrored by the enrollments in our District schools. Since an all-time high of 1,791 students (K-12) in 1997, enrollment in the MTRSD schools has dropped by approximately 45% to its current enrollment levels.

This drop in student population has resulted in a significant amount of vacancy within our school buildings. The Superintendent's office has defined instructional capacity as "the maximum number of students that can be educated within the school building using current instructional methods." Based on this definition, our current occupancy District-wide is approximately 56.8%.

#### *School District enrollment*

Some of the student enrollment drop described above has its roots in the overall population decline. The District also loses approximately 27.8% of its school-aged children to educational institutions outside of the District each year.

Where do these students go? Data from the Superintendent's office shows that, on average over the last five years, these students have been educated at private schools (7.5%); vocational schools (7.0%); public schools in other districts, including school choice and special education (SPED) programs (5.9%); home (3.8%); and charter schools (3.6%).

#### *Community support*

The Mohawk School District receives support from the community in a variety of ways — from volunteer and nonprofit groups, local businesses, and through inclusion in community events.

Volunteer and nonprofit organizations supporting the schools include Parent Teacher Organizations at the elementary schools, as well as the Mohawk Music Association and the Mohawk Athletic Association, both of which raise funds to support programming at the middle and high school level. The Mary Lyon Foundation provides several types of support for the schools, including mini-grants for teachers and emergency assistance for low-income students. In Heath, a community group, Friends of the Heath School Library, runs an annual Book Fair to raise money for new books for the school library. The town also contributes \$10,000 annually to provide free pre-K schooling for Heath residents.

The schools also receive support from local businesses. An example is Davenport Mobil, which has helped Colrain Central School receive Exxon/Mobil grants for math and science programs.

Community events often provide opportunities for schools to raise funds for special activities. In Colrain, for instance, the school trip to Washington, DC is supported by food sales at the Crafts of Colrain festival. Information about the school is included in the Crafts of Colrain festival brochures. The school trip to Washington also is supported by proceeds from the 5K Foundry Run, a community road race for which local emergency services and town office staff provide space and volunteer time. Sanderson Academy receives support through sales from the Local Goods Catalog.

### *Regional Agreement*

The quotation on the cover of this White Paper is a reminder of the fraught history of the Regional Agreement that governs the operation of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District.

The Regional Agreement came into being – after voters in member towns rejected it four times – only when the state legislature intervened with a Special Act, which was signed into law in 1993. It remains controversial to this day, chiefly because of its requirement that any change in the Regional Agreement must be supported by a unanimous vote of all member towns, each town having one vote. Some District towns see this requirement as increasingly outdated and as an obstacle to constructive change. Other District towns see it as protective of their rights. These difficulties came to the forefront only when District enrollments started a process of significant decline that continues to the present day.

Later in this White Paper the LRPC will set forth proposed changes to the current Regional Agreement that we are recommending to the School Committee.

## **Economic Components**

### *School buildings*

The MTRSD currently educates children in five separate school buildings: Mohawk Trail Regional Middle and High School in Buckland; Buckland-Shelburne Elementary School in Shelburne Falls; Sanderson Academy in Ashfield; Heath Elementary School in Heath; and Colrain Central School in Colrain. The Regional Agreement states that District children will be educated in their local schools, with residents of specific towns sending their children to specific buildings.

While population booms of past decades filled these buildings, the current occupancy rate of 56.8%, based on instructional capacity, suggests that there is now a significant amount of underused space in each of the District's school buildings. Although the buildings contain surplus space, they must be maintained and used specifically for educational purposes, according to restrictions placed on the buildings when the MTRSD took out loans for building projects that were approved and partially funded by the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). Despite the fact that these facilities perform important social functions for the towns in which they are located, as described in the

previous section, the maintenance of underused facilities places an economic strain on the District.

#### *Financial support from towns*

According to the most recent data available from the state Department of Revenue (FY 2013), five of the nine District towns spent more than half of their total annual budgets on education. For all of the towns except Hawley, education costs constituted the largest single expenditure in their budgets.

#### *Financial support from the state*

Between FY 2009 and FY 2013, general state aid to MTRSD through the Chapter 70 program decreased by a total of 6.6%, from \$6,262,133 to \$5,850,194. During that same time period, yearly budget spending by MTRSD for education and operation categories (including administration, instruction, pupil services, operation and maintenance, benefits and fixed charges) decreased by 1.8%. While Chapter 70 aid increased slightly each year in FY 2014 and FY 2015, the Mohawk District will still receive a total of 5.8% less Chapter 70 aid in FY 2015 than was received in FY 2009.

#### *Transportation*

In a publication entitled “When Is A Promise Not A Promise? A Warning For Massachusetts School Districts Considering Regionalization,” Steven R. Hemman, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools, wrote the following:

Under Massachusetts law, regional school districts which bus students are “obliged to provide transportation for all school children in grades kindergarten through twelve.” G.L. c. 71, § 16C. The statute goes on to promise that, except for students living less than a mile and half from their schools, “the commonwealth shall reimburse [regional school districts] to the full extent of the amounts for such transportation.” It is fair for the state to take on the costs of busing these students because they attend non-local schools and those who live in rural and exurban communities travel much further distances from their homes than they would in municipal school systems. Typically, these communities do not have any sidewalks for children to use going to school. Moreover, unlike school children who reside in our Commonwealth’s big cities, students who live in regional school districts do not have ready access to public transportation to get them to and from their classes.

Covering more than 250 square miles, the MTRSD is geographically the largest school district in the Commonwealth. We also have a relatively small student population, which earns us the unique distinction of being the most sparsely populated district. These two facts combine to create a situation in which our buses travel long distances to pick up very few students per road mile compared to other K-12 regional school districts in Massachusetts. The Pioneer Valley District (Bernardston, Northfield, Leyden, and Warwick), for instance, has 4.3 students per road mile. In the Nashoba District (Bolton, Lancaster, and Stow), there are 17.4 students per road mile. In our District, we have only 1.9 students per road mile.



As a committee, we spent a great deal of time looking for ways to lower the costs of transportation in such a large school district. We discussed altering school schedules so that elementary students and high school students could ride the same buses, asking parents to bring their children to nearby school bus stops to shorten the distance buses had to travel, and asking parents to car-pool. We concluded that all of these possibilities presented substantial challenges or were infeasible without a revision of the law requiring bus transportation for students living a mile or more from school or from a bus stop. We recommend that these options be further explored by the School Committee. In the end, the greatest opportunity we could find for savings on transportation costs involved pursuing full transportation reimbursement from the state.

The Massachusetts General Laws indicate that MTRSD, like all other regional school districts in the state, should be fully reimbursed for these expenses, with the caveat that such reimbursement is “subject to appropriation.” The amount actually appropriated for our transportation costs has fluctuated unpredictably from year to year. Transportation reimbursements have not been at 100% since FY 2001.

Although the budget passed by the State legislature provided reimbursement to the towns of 90% of transportation cost in the FY 2015 school year, that funding level is much higher than it has been over the last several years and it is now being cut by the governor to close an unanticipated budget gap. Between FY 2008 and FY 2013 inclusive, these repeated shortfalls have resulted in a nearly \$1.6-million loss to MTRSD in transportation costs that were not reimbursed by the state. This situation has created financial hardship for the District and budgeting uncertainty for the District and its member towns.

### **Educational Components**

The fundamental goal of the MTRSD is to provide high-quality education to its students. To achieve this goal, the MTRSD needs to hire and retain qualified teachers, mentor them, and ensure their ongoing professional and intellectual development, as well as develop a culture that promotes inquiry, mutual respect, and success among students and staff. The degree to which the district is able to do these things can be measured in many different ways, including quarterly student progress reports, MCAS and SATs, graduation rates, and teacher evaluations. We recognize that educational progress depends on the quality of teaching and that teachers need the resources, training opportunities, and support from supervisors and peers to do their jobs well. We are not educators, however, and therefore do not have the expertise needed to make recommendations to the School Committee about how to balance these educational quality issues with sustainability. We simply assume that any decisions made by the School Committee about sustainability will take these issues into account.

## **Part 3: Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made with the knowledge that implementing them will take time. We therefore urge that decisions on whether to pursue them and plans to carry them out be made as soon as possible. This is particularly important in the case of the alternative energy proposals since some of the incentives and grants now available may be discontinued in FY 2016 or soon thereafter.

### **1. Share School Buildings**

We acknowledge that maintaining the various buildings in the District is costly. Our predecessor committee saw this problem as well, and in its March 2007 report recommended closing and consolidating schools as a way to maintain MTRSD's financial sustainability. We have not chosen to make that recommendation here, however, because the schools are important social hubs for our communities, as described earlier in this White Paper. Instead of closing schools, we recommend that the School Committee and the towns where the schools are located explore how the school buildings could be used both for education and other purposes. We believe that a multiple-use strategy would lessen the financial burden on MTRSD and provide needed space to towns and community groups, further enhancing the role schools play as social hubs for our communities.

In order for multiple use to happen, however, the School Committee will need to work on two fronts. First, it will need to find multiple-use scenarios that are appropriate for each town. This step will require careful planning in collaboration with the towns, school stakeholders (teachers, administrators, staff, and parents), and other community members. The LRPC recommends that the School Committee develop within the Regional Agreement a process for identifying and implementing multiple uses for school buildings that are appropriate for each member town.

Second, the School Committee will need to work with MSBA and our state legislators to obtain more flexible loan terms that would allow such multiple-use arrangements to be undertaken without financial penalties to MTRSD or the towns. Currently, it is our understanding that restrictions attached to MSBA loans that were used to build, renovate, and expand our school buildings in 1990s and early 2000s now prevent multiple use of buildings. We also understand that discussions are underway to lessen these restrictions.

### **2. Produce Alternative Energy for Heating, Electricity, and Revenue Generation (Potential 30-year Savings for Mohawk, Buckland-Shelburne, and Colrain schools alone is \$5.3 Million)**

The LRPC recommends that the School Committee's Building Subcommittee and the District administration vigorously pursue plans for converting school buildings to alternative and renewable energy sources.

- A. Convert the heating systems of District schools from fossil fuel-based oil heat to a renewable-based wood chip or wood pellet heating system.
- B. Install solar panels for the production of electricity to offset the District's electric costs (and, if feasible, to generate revenue).

### *A. Advantages of Converting to Wood Heat*

Converting from fossil fuel to alternative and renewable energy sources for heating would have multiple benefits. It would:

- Save the District each year an estimated 30% of its current heating costs.
- Support the local economy in the short term by creating jobs during the conversion, and in the long term by creating a demand for wood fuel that might result in the construction of a local wood chip or pellet facility. Such a facility would make use of the abundant low-grade wood in our forests.
- Make the District's energy use environmentally sustainable.
- Educate students about renewable energy.

Feasibility studies completed in 2012 for converting just three of the District's schools (Mohawk High School, Buckland-Shelburne Elementary School, and Colrain Elementary School) show that the District would reap substantial savings by converting from fossil-based oil heat to renewable-based wood chip heating. The analysis provided in the three reports estimates a total 30-year savings on operational costs of \$5.3 million for the three schools.

Vermont has a well-established program for converting schools to wood heat that has resulted in substantial cost savings. Since 1986 when the first Vermont school converted to wood, wood-chip heat has been at least 30% cheaper than oil.<sup>2</sup>

We understand that the Mohawk District has received a \$12,500 state planning grant for the Heath School and that the Hawlemont District has received a similar grant for the Hawlemont School. These grants will enable the two districts to hire a firm to audit the heating systems of the two schools and gather the data needed to apply to the State Sapphire (Schools and Public Housing Integrating Renewables and Efficiency) program. The Sapphire program provides substantial financial aid to cover the cost of converting to wood heat. We applaud this initiative and urge the District to make it a top priority and pursue the same funds for other schools in the Mohawk district.

### *B. The Potential of Solar Power*

The installation of solar power at one or more of MTRSD's schools would substantially reduce the District's electricity costs and could be accomplished with no up-front cost.

The Hoosac Valley Middle and High School, for example, which serves over 600 students, developed a 495 kW ground-mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) project at the school in Cheshire. The system was installed with no up-front cost to the Adams-Cheshire Regional School District because the District signed a long-term Power Purchase Agreement to purchase all the solar-generated electricity produced by the

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<sup>2</sup> Biomass Energy Resource Center, "Vermont Fuels for Schools: A Renewable Energy-Use Initiative" (<http://www.biomasscenter.org/resource-library/publications>). For a study of wood burning and the reduction of greenhouse gases, see Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, "Biomass Sustainability and Carbon Policy Study" (2010) (<http://www.mass.gov/eea/docs/doer/renewables/biomass/manomet-biomass-report-full-hirez.pdf>).

installation. The system is connected “behind the meter”<sup>3</sup> at the school and produces an estimated 596,000 kWh of electricity annually, providing about 75% of the school’s annual consumption. The system enabled the school district to achieve the following goals without any up-front expenditures or ongoing maintenance costs:

- Substantially reduce the school’s carbon footprint.
- Substantially reduce the electricity cost per kWh.
- Stabilize the long-term electricity expense.
- Provide an on-site educational tool for the students.
- Obtain LEED “Gold” status for the school’s renovation project.

Bob Clarke of 621 Energy in Acton, the company that installed the system at Hoosac, reported that the school saved \$30,000 last year in electricity costs and is expected to save more in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Clarke said Mohawk Trail Regional High School is a perfect site for roof-mounted solar panels because of its south-facing orientation and metal roof. Since solar panels can be attached directly to the ridges on the metal roof, it would not be necessary to penetrate the surface of the roof. Clarke’s firm can do a free assessment of the building and make a proposal. The LRPC has passed this information on to the Building Subcommittee and to Robin Pease, MTRSD’s Transportation and Facilities Coordinator, and recommends that MTRSD solicit a proposal from 621 Energy or pursue a similar course leading to the installation of solar panels for the benefit of MTRSD, as soon as possible. Clarke said that the current incentives for installing solar power are in place until mid-2015, but will probably be reduced in FY16, so it is important to act on this recommendation as soon as possible.

### **3. Pursue Full Reimbursement of Regional Transportation Costs from the State**

As noted earlier in this White Paper, the State legislature has appropriated funds for 90% reimbursement of regional school district transportation costs for FY 2015, an amount significantly higher than it has been in recent years. We applauded this change, but the governor has now reduced it to help close a projected state budget gap. The last time it was near the 90% level was in 2008, when the District received 89.9% reimbursement. The subsequent years saw reimbursement at much lower levels. It dropped as low as 57.6% in 2011. Last year’s reimbursement was 60.5%. If the District had received 100% reimbursement for transportation costs between FY 2008 and FY 2013 inclusive, an additional \$1,574,738 would have flowed into the District during those six years.

From conversations with Robert Aeschback, Chair of the MTRSD School Committee, we are aware that the actual amount reimbursed for transportation by the state may change from the original allocated amount during the course of a school year as changes are

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<sup>3</sup> “Behind the meter” solar power systems supply electricity to the buildings for which they are designed. Excess power goes onto the grid. “Grid supply” systems are large-scale systems designed solely to sell electricity to the grid.

<sup>4</sup> If a system installed at Mohawk Trail Regional High School produced more electricity than the school used, the credit on the school’s electric bill could be transferred to the bills of other schools in the district, thus reducing their costs as well.

made to state appropriations. That has been the case this year.

The LRPC recommends that the School Committee work with the region's elected state officials each year to procure the highest possible reimbursement from the state for school transportation, send a delegation each year to Boston to lobby the State Senate and House Ways and Means committees for this purpose, and remind the governor of the importance of these funds for sustaining rural school districts. We further recommend, as mentioned earlier in this White Paper, that the School Committee re-examine all reasonable options for reducing transportation costs and to pursue all legislative and regulatory changes necessary to allow for implementation.

#### **4. Conduct Student Exit Surveys**

We believe that the District's current strategy for minimizing enrollment losses through school choice is inadequate. We understand that exit surveys are sent to some but not all students who choose to attend a non-District school. Eighth-grade students who leave MTRSD to pursue vocational education, for example, are not sent exit surveys currently. The LRPC recommends as follows:

- The District should begin sending exit surveys to all students leaving the District, regardless of their future education plans.
- The District should survey incoming school choice students as well, in an effort to determine what aspects of the MTRSD experience are most attractive to potential "choice-in" students.
- A School Committee subcommittee or committee similar to the LRPC, in cooperation with school administrators, should send a letter to parents of students who have prematurely left any of the District schools within the past five years. The letter should ask the parents to respond *anonymously* to an enclosed questionnaire seeking information on why they chose to send their child to another school.
- Finally, the School Committee should work with the District to develop action plans for retention based on the results of these surveys.

We believe this information could be useful in assessing whether the District should make changes in curriculum or other areas that would retain more students.

#### **5. Advocate for Incorporating a "Rurality" Factor in Chapter 70 State Aid Formula**

The LRPC recommends that the School Committee work with our state representatives to draft legislation that would incorporate a "Rurality" Factor in the Chapter 70 State Aid Formula. A study prepared for the DESE in November 2009 entitled "A Study of Central Office Capacity in Regional Districts" by the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) contains the following findings:

Some findings from the data are that superintendents and clerical staff in smaller districts have primary responsibility for more functions than in larger districts. This indicates that these superintendents are likely to have less time available for instructional leadership, and that clerical staff often have primary responsibility for functions that in larger districts are done by business officials or technology directors. Another indicator of the strain on small

district leadership is the number of secondary responsibilities in diverse areas carried by SPED administrators in small districts – double the number than in larger districts. The median number of clerical staff increases by 250% from the study’s smallest to largest districts while the median of district administrators increases by only 65%, indicating that professional staff may spend more time doing clerical tasks in smaller districts.

The “Rurality Factor” would come into play when funding certain school districts that fall within the first quartile (enrollment ranging from 651 to 1643) as defined on p. 2 of the MARS study. The LRPC recognizes enrollment sparsity as a function of student population per square mile of district. Therefore the “Rurality Factor” would be formally established as a ratio of student population to a school district’s total land area in square miles. For example, should the state’s ratio for the average of all towns exceed 600% of the district being evaluated, that district’s funding will be increased by 25% to make up for documented losses in efficiency. Under this formula, MTRSD (which has only 3.8 students per square mile) would qualify for increased aid.

## **6. Enhance On-The-Ground Familiarity of School Committee Members with the District’s Operations**

As a result of conversations with teachers, students, administrators, and other personnel, the LRPC has concluded that greater communication between School Committee members and those directly involved in the life of the schools would enhance the School Committee’s knowledge of the challenges faced by teachers, students, administrators and other personnel, and assist them in making decisions affecting the schools. The LRPC recommends that a policy be established requiring that School Committee members interact directly with District operational and administrative personnel on a regular basis.

We recommend that a formal policy be established for School Committee members requiring that each member visit two of the District’s schools each semester. Over the course of members’ elected terms they will have visited with all of the schools within the District. While visiting, they should:

- Observe classroom teaching;
- Eat cafeteria food; and
- Take time to talk privately (off the record) with students, teachers, and other school personnel.

## **7. Support the Drive for High-Speed Internet Access**

High-speed internet has become a vital part of contemporary life. It now is needed for day-to-day activities such as working remotely, doing homework, banking, filing taxes, and enjoying home entertainment. Schools in many parts of the state now require students to use the internet after school hours to access homework assignments, complete projects, and do other essential academic work. With all of these activities in mind, families buying houses today generally look for homes that have reliable high-speed internet access.

Unfortunately, houses in six of the MTRSD member towns lack high-speed internet access, and only some of the houses in the other two towns are served through a cable-

based internet provider. This situation means that students in our District are having a very different educational experience than that of their peers in the eastern part of the state, where high-speed internet access is the norm. It also means that homes in our area are less attractive to potential buyers, including parents who expect internet access to be a part of the contemporary educational experience – a situation that worsens the student enrollment decline discussed earlier in this paper. For these reasons, we recommend that the school administration and School Committee, along with the towns, actively support an affordable broadband initiative that keeps pace with the expectations of parents interested in providing their children with a quality education.

All of the Mohawk District towns will be working on ways to bring “last mile” high-speed internet access to residents’ homes over the next four months. Buckland and Shelburne are preparing to work with Comcast to expand cable-based internet access in their towns. The Select Boards of the other MTRSD towns, which lack cable internet, all recently signed resolutions expressing interest in pursuing Wired West/ MBI plans to roll out “last mile” access to homes, an issue that will come up at their respective Annual Town Meetings in the spring of 2015. While details about how the towns will finance “last mile” access have not been finally resolved, there is a common understanding across the towns that high-speed internet is essential for the economic future of our region. We recommend that the School Committee actively support and participate in this effort.

## **8. Proposed Changes to the Regional Agreement**

### *A. Section XIV – Amendments*

Currently all eight towns in the District are required to vote “yes” in order to amend the Regional Agreement. With the goal of making the Regional Agreement more flexible, the LRPC recommends that the District adopt a weighted voting system for amending the agreement, like the one used by the School Committee, or a one town/one vote system that would allow amendments to be made by majority vote, with two exceptions:

1. No school could be closed without the consent of the town or towns served by that school.
2. No students could be sent to an elementary school other than the one currently serving their town without the consent of the town.

### *B. Section IIIB - Pupils Entitled to Attend the Regional Elementary Schools*

Currently the Regional Agreement states that Heath elementary students will go to the Heath school, Colrain students to the Colrain school, and so forth. The Agreement also makes it necessary for all eight towns to vote “yes” in order to merge two or three schools or make some other arrangement. In order to encourage towns to consider creative solutions to sustainability, the LRPC recommends that the Agreement be amended to allow towns, if they so choose, to send some or all of their elementary students to a school in another town or to enter into other agreements for sharing students, teachers, and administrators with a neighboring town or towns that may or may not involve closing a school completely. The exploration of such arrangements might be initiated by the towns themselves or by the School Committee. In any event, such

arrangements will require consultation with all stakeholders, including the teachers, administrators, staff, and parents of the schools affected and other community members. They would also require the permission of the School Committee, but not a vote of towns unaffected by the change, in order to implement them.

### *C. Section III E - Vocational and Trade School Pupils*

The LRPC recommends that a paragraph be added to the Regional Agreement that clarifies the vocational education responsibilities of the MTRSD Central Office and School Committee, as well as those of the Towns that are not part of a regional vocational school district (referred to as “the Towns” in this section). This text should be added to the Regional Agreement’s Section III (E) (Vocational and Trade School Pupils).

The LRPC recommends that the duties of the Towns, Central Office, and School Committee in managing transportation for vocational students be defined as follows:

- The Central Office and School Committee should be responsible for negotiating a bus contract for the vocational students as part of the district transportation contract, as they are currently doing.
- The Towns themselves should decide on a means of sharing and managing the bus routes in the most efficient manner, as well as negotiating special arrangements with the bus company when possible to reduce costs (e.g. by appointing a committee made up of one or more representatives from each of the Towns). The current Vocational Education Advisory Committee should draft this section of the Regional Agreement and be invited to make additional suggestions for its content.

### *D. Section II – Type of Regional District: Pre-K District-Wide Uniformity*

The LRPC believes that providing quality preschool education for three- and four-year-old children is an important part of the District’s responsibilities. Although the Regional Agreement specifies that the District has uniform jurisdiction over “grades or programs antecedent to kindergarten,” there is a diversity of financial practices and policies for the preschools that serve our youngest students. We find this diversity problematic.

Five of the preschools in the nine towns are public, while one is private. The private school charges a flat-rate tuition to its residents. Two of the public preschools charge a sliding-rate tuition for residents, while the other three public preschools charge no tuition for residents. Some families cannot afford to pay tuition, and their children are being denied the opportunity to attend. For many families who send their children to preschools that charge tuition, the cost can be burdensome.

The LRPC recommends that the School Committee prepare an amendment to the Regional Agreement that will:

1. Specify that each elementary school in the District maintain and operate a public preschool within its elementary school facility;
2. Make preschool education available to all District residents at no cost to the students’ families;



3. Specify what part of the cost of preschool education shall be deemed an operating cost of the District; and
4. Specify what part of the cost of preschool education shall be borne separately by each of the six member towns maintaining District elementary schools with a method of apportionment that will be acceptable to the District and towns.

*E. Section X – Local Education Councils*

The LRPC recommends that the Regional Agreement be amended to add a paragraph to this section identifying a policy that requires each school to be more visible with the activities of their respective Local Education Councils. Additionally, each school's web page would clearly identify the current council members and post monthly agendas and minutes. This would enable members of the public to be informed about the activities of their respective councils.

## **Part 4: Conclusion**

This White Paper is made possible by the hard work of a dedicated group of citizens, appointed by member towns, who gave of their energy, talents, and time to fulfill the charge given them by the School Committee in the summer of 2013. During our many discussions we did not always agree on the decisions we had to make. But in the end our mutual respect and the significance of our task kept us together as a team. Through compromise we eventually reached consensus.

Our recommendations are intended to assist the School Committee in its quest for ways to sustain the Mohawk Trail Regional School District. The increasing strains of the District's financial difficulties are conflicting with the premium we place on the education of our children. We hope that this report will provide the information, resources, and arguments that are needed to enhance the prospects for the District's long-term financial stability and the maintenance of high quality education.

In that spirit, the MTRSD Long Range Planning Committee strongly recommends that the School Committee propose a realistic timeline for actions it proposes to take as a consequence of this report's recommendations. We particularly hope that this report will not be set aside for future action only to disappear, as did the 2007 Interim Planning Report. The work of that group reached many of the same conclusions that we have. We believe that the 2007 document was insufficiently studied by the School Committee of that time, inasmuch as no action was ever taken on that document. We hope that our report and its recommendations will be carefully examined and acted upon, sooner rather than later. We particularly urge the School Committee to pursue the conversion of school heating systems to alternative energy as quickly as possible in order to take advantage of the substantial annual cost savings projected.

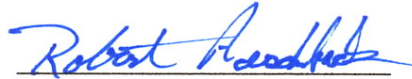
We urge the School Committee begin discussions as soon as possible on a set of proposals to be presented at the 2015 Annual Town Meetings of District towns. If that window of time is not enough, we recommend that recommendations be presented for action at the 2016 Town Meetings, with reports by town School Committee representatives to be made at 2015 Town Meetings on the School Committee's progress in reviewing the sustainability recommendations of this report. If this continuing scrutiny by the Committee and by towns is not sustained, we worry that momentum will be lost.

We hope that the recommendations we have set forth on pp. 10-17 of this White Paper will, if adopted, enable member towns of MTRSD to sustain the District's educational quality for current and future students of our schools. We thank the School Committee for affording us this opportunity to serve the communities in which we live.

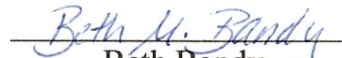
Respectfully submitted to the Mohawk Trail Regional School Committee by  
the MTRSD Long Range Planning Committee:



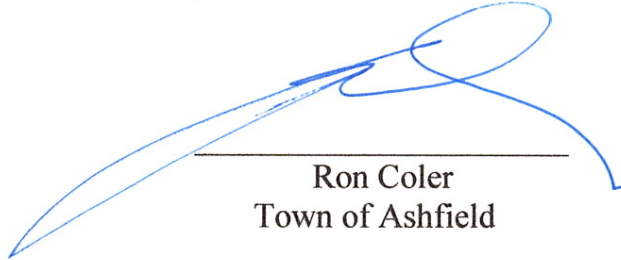
Joseph Judd, Chair  
Town of Shelburne



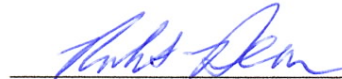
Robert Aeschback  
Chair, MTRSD School Committee



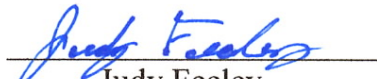
Beth Bandy  
Town of Charlemont



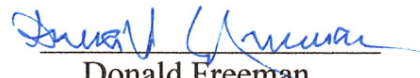
Ron Coler  
Town of Ashfield



Robert Dean  
Town of Buckland



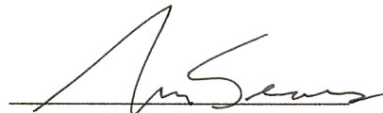
Judy Feeley  
Town of Plainfield



Donald Freeman  
Town of Heath



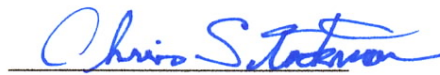
Susan Gleason  
Town of Rowe



John Sears  
Town of Hawley



Larry Shearer  
Town of Colrain



Chris Stockman  
Town of Plainfield

January 21, 2015

## **Part 5: Appendixes**

### **Appendix 1**

#### **Regional Agreement passage on changing the Agreement**

The following section of the MTRSD School District Regional Agreement explains the procedure for amending the agreement. In this passage, “Committee” refers to the MTRSD School Committee. A copy of the full Regional Agreement can be found on the Mohawk Central Office website:

<http://www.mohawkschools.org/docs/committees/resources/MTDRegionalAgreement-2003-approvedbyDOE1-28-04-Current%20RA.pdf>

Regional Agreement, Section XIV: Amendments

#### **B) Procedure**

Any proposal for amendment, except a proposal for amendment providing for the withdrawal of a member town (which shall be acted upon as provided in Section XVI), may be initiated by a vote of a majority of all the members of the Committee or by a petition signed by 10% of the registered voters of any one of the member towns. In the latter case, said petition shall contain at the end thereof a certification by the town clerk of such member town as to the number of registered voters in said town according to the most recent voting list and the number of signatures on the petition which appear to be the names of registered voters of said town and said petition shall be presented to the secretary of the Committee. In either case, the secretary of the Committee shall mail or deliver a notice in writing to the board of selectmen of each of the member towns that a proposal to amend this Agreement has been made and shall enclose a copy of such proposal (without the signature in the case of a proposal by petition). The selectmen of each member town shall include in the warrant for the next annual or a special town meeting called for the purpose, an article stating the proposal or the substance thereof. Such amendment shall take effect upon its acceptance by all of the member towns, acceptance by each town to be a majority vote at town meeting as aforesaid.

## Appendix 2

### Regional school district transportation reimbursement in Massachusetts General Laws

*Regional school district transportation cost reimbursement is covered in Massachusetts General Law, Title XII, Chapter 71, Section 16C. That section is quoted below, with relevant passages highlighted in bold text for emphasis by the LRPC. The original text is available online at*

<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section16C>

“The regional school district shall be subject to all laws pertaining to school transportation; and when the agreement provides for the furnishing of transportation by the regional school district, **the regional school district shall be obliged to provide transportation for all school children in grades kindergarten through twelve and the commonwealth shall reimburse such district to the full extent of the amounts expended for such transportation** [emphasis added]; provided, however, that no reimbursement for transportation between school and home shall be made on account of any pupil who resides less than one and one-half miles from the school of attendance, measured by a commonly traveled route. The commonwealth shall further reimburse such district to the full extent of the amounts expended for the transportation of pupils between school and a child care center licensed or approved by the department of early education and care or a child care facility which is part of a public school system or a private, organized educational system, in accordance with standards approved by the school committee; provided, however, that no reimbursement shall be made if the distance between the school and said facility is less than one and one-half miles, measured by a commonly traveled route, nor shall reimbursement be provided for transportation to a day care facility located outside the boundaries of the regional school district. The state treasurer shall annually, on or before November twentieth, pay to the regional school districts, **subject to appropriation** [emphasis added], the sums required for such reimbursement and approved by the commissioner of education.”

## Appendix 3

### General Data Sources

- 2013-2014 Massachusetts Municipal Directory
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
- Massachusetts Department of Revenue
- Massachusetts School Building Authority
- MTRSD Superintendent's Office
- University of Massachusetts Amherst: Donahue Institute Massachusetts Population Projections
- United States Census Bureau

### Additional Sources and Recommended Reading

- 2007 final report of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District Interim Planning Committee.
- "Educational Collaborative Planning Process," published by the predecessor districts to the Mohawk Trail Regional School District, 1988, pp. 12-13.
- "Franklin County Schools: A 2020 Vision", New England School Development Council, April 27, 2009.
- Hoosac Valley Middle/High School Case Study, prepared by 621 Energy.
- K-12 Committee on Organization, August 1992.
- Massachusetts General Law Title XII, Chapter 71, Section 16C "School Transportation".
- Preliminary Feasibility Reports on Biomass Heating Analysis for MTRSD school buildings, prepared by Yellow Wood Associates, Inc. and Richmond Energy Associates LLC, with the US Department of Agriculture and the Wood Education and Resource Center (2012).
- "A Study of Central Office Capacity in Regional Districts," prepared by the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) for DESE, November 2009.
- "Vermont Fuels for Schools: An Overview," by Biomass Energy Resource Center. [http://www.biomasscenter.org/pdfs/VFFS\\_brochure-1.pdf](http://www.biomasscenter.org/pdfs/VFFS_brochure-1.pdf)
- "When Is A Promise Not A Promise? A Warning For Massachusetts School Districts Considering Regionalization," Steven R. Hemman, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools. <http://www.massassociationregionalschools.org/downloads/WHEN%20IS%20A%20PROMISE%20NOT%20A%20PROMISE.doc>