

March 7, 2007

Majority Report Executive Summary

The Interim Planning Committee respectfully submits to the Mohawk Trail Regional School Committee and its member towns its recommendation to further explore a plan to create a Regional Elementary School in Shelburne Falls. This would entail closing three elementary schools in the next three years. Our position is based on a strong majority recommendation, with 11 of the 12 committee members voting in favor.

The purpose of the Interim Planning Committee was to develop an “interim” educational plan that would best meet the needs of our financially strapped regional school district. The main goal of the committee was to preserve as much educational programming as possible for all grade levels, PK-12, while reducing operating costs to the extent possible. The committee voted in favor of slowing, stopping, or reversing the school closures if the district’s financial situation changes and if the community finds slowing, stopping, or reversing the closures to be educationally beneficial.

It should be noted that the portion of the school budget “above minimum contributions” that member towns must finance through local property taxes has grown from \$196,000 in 2004 to more than \$2.8 million in 2007, just three years later. This is primarily because state funding has decreased overall as part of a policy to shift a higher share of education costs to the towns. In addition, the current state funding formula is directly linked to student enrollment and the number of children attending our schools has decreased from 1,522 to 1,254 in those same three years. Our costs continue to rise much faster than state funding.

Each of our four elementary schools has many fewer children than even a few years ago, so the teaching staff and administration has been substantially reduced. Currently two principals share responsibilities in the four buildings, a situation that is extremely challenging. The staffing of support services in these four buildings is increasingly inefficient, with, for example, a full-time nurse needed in each building even though the 2007 school population is very small (Buckland-Shelburne, 210 students; Sanderson, 149; Colrain, 126; Heath, 58). Librarians, secretaries, custodians, and others are all needed for each of our buildings, as are copy machines, books, cleaning supplies, and such. Our principals, art teachers, and music teachers are traveling between schools, time that might otherwise be spent in classrooms.

There is no doubt among committee members that the state funding formula is in need of revision, but it is also evident that our schools are becoming less and less financially efficient as their populations decline. Many on the committee believe that while the State has a responsibility to revise the funding formula, the Mohawk Trail Regional School District has an ongoing responsibility to evaluate and adjust our operations to be as financially efficient as we can be (irrespective of State funding) while ensuring the best possible education for all children in the district.

Many questions were asked, including:

“How small is too small?”

“Is it worth giving up elementary school art, music, and gym to maintain a school in each community?”
“Would we give up librarians and nurses as well?”
“Would elementary class sizes of 30 still be better than closing schools?”
“Are large class sizes better than losing art, music, and phys ed?”
“Would keeping all schools open be worth losing phys ed, art, music, sports, and AP classes at the high school?”
“If we close buildings, will the communities without elementary schools suffer population loss and decline in property values?”
“If we force towns to pay assessments they can't afford, will our roads get plowed and fire-fighting equipment serviced? Will our libraries be closed?”

All of these are important and difficult questions, and we must continue to search for answers. Meanwhile, there is a group of children in the Mohawk Trail Regional School District right now. They range in age from 5 years old to 18 years old, and they are counting on the public schools to provide a solid education.

Interim Education Planning Subcommittee

To determine what constitutes a solid education, the committee looked to the Interim Education Planning Subcommittee, which conducted research and interviewed respected educators from within our district as well as outside it (*see* Interim Education Planning Subcommittee Final Report, *Appendix 1*). This subcommittee identified the following conditions as being central to providing high-quality education to the children of this district:

High-quality schools must:

- Provide children with regular and meaningful programs in the related arts” (art, physical education, music)
- Maintain class sizes at “reasonable” levels (The Education Task Force recommended grades K-1, 15 students per classroom maximum; grades 2-4, 20 maximum; grades 5-8, 24 maximum; grades 9-12, 25 maximum.)
- Avoid disruptive levels of staff turnover
- Have the resources (fiscal and otherwise) to carry out carefully developed research-based learning activities that are consistent with State Curriculum Frameworks

The Interim Planning Committee determined that **the regional elementary school model could meet these criteria during this “interim” period.** If no action is taken and the current 4-school model is continued, the district will experience a reduction of related arts, larger class sizes, more staff turnover, and the elimination of many resources currently being used to bolster curriculum.

Furthermore, the Education Planning Subcommittee noted that multi-grade classrooms are desirable **ONLY** when supported by adequate training, materials, staff, and program continuity, and are based on an educational philosophy. The current 4-school model will result in more unsupported multi-grade classrooms, whereas **the regionalization model will minimize or eliminate the need for multi-grade classrooms.** As currently constructed, the FY08 four-school model will have 6 multi-grade classrooms, whereas there are 2 in FY07.

Other strengths and opportunities of the regional elementary school include (*see* SWOT Analysis of

K-5 Regional with Staggered Closings, part of Education Subcommittee Final Report, *Appendix 1*):

- consistent education for all children entering middle school**
- consistent class sizes**
- full-time in-building principal**
- possibility for accelerated academic track**
- centralization of SPED services**
- more social diversity**
- greater pool of friends for all kids**
- Before-school and after-school programs for all families**
- 6th graders at the Middle School get access to content-specialist teachers, foreign language classes, sports teams, drama**

Interim Transportation Team

The issue of the time spent on buses by elementary age students is perhaps the most challenging. Transportation costs and “time on bus” were researched by the Interim Transportation Team (*see Interim Transportation Team Final Report, Appendix 2*). This subcommittee found costs are affected by the number of students, number of buses in use, and the total distance buses need to travel. The subcommittee said that transportation costs with a new contract would likely rise equally in each of the models, but costs will depend in large part on the School Committee policy of how much “time on bus” is acceptable.

More work needs to be done to determine exactly what these times would be. The transportation subcommittee evaluated a previous study, which showed that the closure of Sanderson Academy resulted in the largest gain in time on bus, with mean times increasing from 50 minutes to 85 minutes on one particular run. If bus routes are designed ignoring town lines this added “time on bus” could be reduced. **The transportation subcommittee noted that last year 85 percent of our busing costs were covered by Chapter 71 transportation funding, which would mitigate greatly the cost of additional buses needed to reduce bus times.**

Interim Building Use Study Committee

The Interim Building Use Study Committee worked on analyzing the capacity of all buildings in the district, the need for capital improvements, and the possibility of leasing space in parts of buildings or closed buildings (*see Interim Building Use Study Committee Final Report, Appendix 3*).

The subcommittee found that, based on our current and projected enrollment, all of the students in the Mohawk District will not fit at the high school/middle school building in the near future and may not fit in the longer term. **The Buckland-Shelburne Elementary School building is the only elementary building that could accommodate all of the elementary-age children of the district in a period extending over the next few years, adding value to its continued use despite the need for improvements there** (*see Appendix 5 of the Building Use final report*). It was determined that the majority of improvements in the Buckland-Shelburne building would be needed whether or not the schools are consolidated.

Municipal use of school buildings was explored but did not offer sufficient revenue potential. The option of commercially leasing portions of the buildings or even whole buildings also did not prove viable as a solution to the district's financial shortfall, because the revenues would be minimal (\$9/sq. ft. X 12,000 sq. ft. currently available = \$108,000) and the State could claim most of that revenue (in proportion to the amount it has invested in the buildings).

The capacity of each of the four elementary schools plays a large role in which models could hold the necessary number of elementary-age children depending on which school or schools are closed. The Building Use Study Committee evaluated the capacity of each building two ways: 1) using the small class size requirements put forth by the Education Planning Subcommittee, and 2) using Department of Education foundation class sizes.

This committee determined that students would fit in the BSE building in the 2007-08 school year if a K-5 model was used and class sizes were slightly larger than the Education Planning Subcommittee's recommendations. **By staggering the school closures, the small class size recommendation could be met.**

Budget Task Force

The Budget Task Force, charged with evaluating the relative savings between models, found the possibility for savings in several of the models considered. **Projected savings were highest for the two Regional Elementary School models** as follows:

Regional K-5 Elementary with 6th grade to the Middle School consolidated in one year:
\$5.4 million saved over 5 years

Regional K-5 Elementary with 6th grade to the Middle School consolidated over three years:
\$4.6 million saved over 5 years

It should be noted that these figures are projections for the purpose of comparing options and more precise numbers will come only from building an actual budget for the chosen model. The critical assumptions made in building these projections are detailed in the Budget Task Force Final Report (*Appendix 4*).

The budget projections were done using class sizes recommended by the Education Planning Subcommittee, which are substantially smaller than those assumed by the State's foundation formula. This means that **the new consolidated school could have smaller class sizes than most of our current elementary schools**. A budget built around class sizes presumed in the Foundation Budget would result in more savings, but in consideration of our goal of maintaining quality, the Interim Planning Committee chose to accept the recommendations of the Education Planning Subcommittee.

The budget projections were done using the Building Task Forces guidelines for savings of mothballed buildings, which were derived with input from local businesses and professionals:

Phone/water/sewer	reduced by 90%
Heat expenses	reduced by 7%
Gas and electric	reduced by 75%
Grounds maintenance	reduced by 20%

The cost of savings in utilities and maintenance of closed buildings is not significant. **The cost savings in consolidation come from staff reductions (nurses, librarians, principals, aides, specialists, and teachers).**

Costs for moving classrooms to a consolidated school are one-time costs that would reduce savings for the first year only. Those costs are estimated to be on the order of \$30,000 over the three years.

Costs for repairs needed at BSE are significant in the next five years, but many on the committee feel that these repairs will need to be done whether or not the schools are consolidated. The first-year costs are projected to be \$27,000. The largest costs are for the roof replacement (\$376,000) and paving driveways and walkways (\$150,000). It is projected that these larger costs would be incurred in less than 4 years (*see* Interim Building Use Study Committee Final Report, *Appendix 3*). **Financing repairs at BSE does not make the model cost prohibitive.** A municipal bond for \$550,000 for 30 years would cost on average about \$71,700 per year.

Conclusion

The Interim Planning Committee made its recommendation to close schools based on the research it was able to compile in the past six months. Its recommendation is intended to give the School Committee direction in its pursuit of solutions for the financial crisis of the Mohawk Trail Regional School District and the inevitable negative effects of this crisis on education. Although the Interim Planning Committee supports the district's lobbying efforts, the committee believes adequate changes to the funding formula are likely several years off, and the district may never get enough additional monies from the State to fully support the proper operation of our four elementary schools. As member towns are already paying upward of 60 percent of their entire budget on local education, the School Committee will have few options other than making drastic cuts to educational programming.

It should be noted that the Regional Elementary School model results in a school of less than 400 students who live in West County; while different from what we are currently familiar with, it would be a small, local school by most standards. It is in the best interest of the children and teens in the Mohawk Trail Regional School District that the School Committee continue exploring the many advantages of the Regional Elementary School model and what is needed to make it a dynamic and attractive choice. It seems worthwhile to try to turn these difficult times into an opportunity with the creation of a high-quality, fully supported regional school where all children can achieve educational success.