

Sustainability Study IFB

June 1, 2022

Regional School District

Mohawk Trail Regional School District

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Purpose

The purpose of the proposed project is to provide technical assistance to the Mohawk Trail Regional School District in collecting data on current conditions within the district and prepare projection estimates in the critical areas of enrollment, fiscal conditions, educational programming, and building infrastructure to create a long-term sustainability plan for educating students in the rural communities the district serves.

In 2016, the Mohawk Trail BEST (Building Education Sustainability and Trust) committee presented its summary report detailing the conditions within the district and outlining a three-phase approach to addressing the issues inherent in educating students in a small rural district with declining enrollment, flat state aid, limited economies of scale, and increasing fixed costs. This summary report was preceded by the work of Mohawk Trail School Committee's Interim Planning Committee in 2006-2007. The focus of the Interim Planning Committee was to consolidate the elementary schools in the district to one school facility. In this case, the recommendation failed at town meeting with two towns, Heath and Shelburne casting no votes. The BEST committee recommendations stalled at phase II again, without unanimous support at town meetings, which would have brought grade 6 students to the Mohawk Trail Regional School, creating a grade 6-8 middle school and consolidated Colrain Central School with Buckland Shelburne Elementary. Phase I was actualized and Heath Elementary School was closed in 2017.

In 2020, the school district reduced the operating budget by approximately 10% in anticipation of reduced revenues due to the COVID 19 pandemic. The district has leveraged federal ESSER monies to offset overall expenses and provided increased support for students particularly in social emotional learning and academic recovery, however these funds will no longer be available in FY24. Rural Aid has provided some relief to the district; however, this is not yet a sustainable revenue source imbedded in Chapter 70 aid to the district and is not an amount that significantly changes the financial outlook for the district. The SOA (Student Opportunity Act) has had limited impact for the district due to the hold harmless factor of the foundation formula, and the district is years away from receiving any increases in Chapter 70 aid. In addition, the SOA has increased minimum contributions of towns, basically shifting the known increased expenses of educating students to the towns already struggling to maintain key services to their communities.

It has been widely shared that people in the broader community have not felt a sense of urgency about the financial challenges facing the Mohawk Trail School District and, thus, have been reluctant to make the significant changes to current operating and organizational structures needed to address these challenges. It is the purpose of this proposed project to 1) analyze the current operating condition of the district; 2) project the impact of maintaining the status quo on district finances and educational programming; and 3) recommend potential changes to organization, operations and infrastructure that will improve the district's long-term sustainability.

Benefits

The benefits of the proposed project are having technical assistance to update data regarding the current conditions of Mohawk Trail Regional School district in the critical areas of enrollment and school choice, fiscal conditions, educational programming, and building infrastructure. By assessing current and projected future conditions, the study will help to improve community understanding of these conditions and their impact on school operations and sustainability, leading to a willingness to consider alternative operational and organizational structures that support the long-term sustainability of the district.

Measures of Success

Analysis of current conditions and projections of key variables

Community participation in data collection

Community engagement and understanding of the process to create recommendations for improving sustainability of the regional district

Community support of recommendations

Implemented plan for sustainability of the school district

Proposal Areas

Enrollment and school choice analysis and projections

Provide an analysis of demographics in the following areas:

- Regional birthrate and enrollment projection
 - “To what degree will regional birthrates and enrollment projections impact revenue in the District for 5, 10 and 15 years?”
 - “To what degree will regional birthrates and enrollment projections impact school-building capacity?”
- Analysis of school choice receiving and sending
 - “Are there strategies that can be implemented to increase incoming school choice, decrease outgoing school choice and increase parental involvement in the schools and school district particularly in grades 6 and 8?”
 - “Are there strategies that can be implemented to mobilize all staff in the effort to retain students and increase parental and community support of the District?”
- Assess and consider regional impacts of the following:

East-West rail project
Available broad-band internet

Fiscal conditions and projections

Evaluate current fiscal conditions within the district and project long-term fiscal sustainability of the district by addressing the following questions:

- “Is the existing fiscal structure sustainable for towns in 5, 10 and 15 years?” ● “What will the costs of current educational programming (without change) mean for assessments in the current organizational structure in 5, 10, and 15 years?” ● “How will the SOA and Chapter 70 changes impact the fiscal conditions of the district in 5, 10 and 15 years?”
- “What is the impact of SOA on hold harmless aid in the district long term?” ● “What does the SOA mean for minimum town contributions in the next 5 years?” ● “How will charter school and choice trends impact the district in 5, 10, and 15 years?”

Educational programming analysis

Evaluate current educational programming within the district to assess and identify potential cost saving structures by addressing the following questions:

- “Is the existing district/school department program meeting the current and future needs of the district considering both student needs and town financial constraints?” ● “What is recommended to meet the minimum/maximum needs of the district from each school/department /program?”
- “Is the district’s special education program and continuum of services meeting or exceeding the requirements of the State/Federal law? If the program is exceeding the requirements, what is the cost of the extra effort? If the program is not meeting requirements, what are the recommendations to meet the requirements?”
- “Is the district’s social emotional learning program meeting the unique needs of students, given the return to in-person learning during the pandemic?”
- Offer multiple strategies: “Are there processes and practices that could be employed to be more cost effective? Are there alternatives currently available or what would be required to make them available?”
- Identify and address potential cost savings
- Conduct school and community interviews: “Are the operational practices of the school committee effective in providing essential oversight to the district (this should include committee training, development of policies and budget, relations with administration staff and the public, running of public meetings, **commitment to the goals of the MASC, etc.)?**” [not sure what this means? But not a reason to hold this up]

Facilities analysis

An evaluation of our four buildings and a report that would detail what would need to be done to maintain their value and operation. We request the following information be included in the report:

- Current condition of our assets
- Maintenance that's required
- System deficiencies

- Remaining useful life of our assets and capital replacement needs
- A prioritized list of all of the repairs/replacement needs with recommended timing
Estimates for all of these expenses
- Current capacity and usage review
- Assessment of potential grade reconfiguration
- Establish climate change readiness and response

Successful bidders will possess the following:

- Knowledge and experience of the operational systems of regional school districts ●
Knowledge and experience providing systems overview and recommendations for the following areas:
 - Academic programming
 - Enrollment and school choice
 - Facilities
 - Fiscal conditions
- Ability to facilitate meetings
- Knowledge of all Massachusetts state laws and regulations pertaining to a regional school district
- Ability to survey community at large

Project start date

- June 20, 2022