



8 Town Regional School District Planning Board

Recommendation Report

September 26, 2023

The 8 Town Regional School District Planning Board (our “Board”) recommends that the towns of Alford, Egremont, Great Barrington, Monterey, New Marlborough, Sheffield, Stockbridge, and West Stockbridge join to form a new PreK-12 regional school district - to be known as the Southern Berkshire Hills Regional School District (the “New District”) and to be governed by the terms of the proposed regional agreement forwarded with this recommendation.

Our recommended model maintains all existing elementary and middle schools as they are but creates a single high school in a new state-of-the-art facility to be built on the Great Barrington campus, with greatly expanded vocational (also known as Chapter 74) facilities and programs, which would be available to high school students in all eight towns.

Background

Faced with the challenges of declining enrollment and rising operating costs, the Select Boards of the eight towns decided to establish a board to study the possible regionalization and/or expanded collaboration between the Berkshire Hills and Southern Berkshire Regional School Districts. The eight towns each appointed three members (as provided by statute) and our 8 Town Board formally began its work in March 2020.

With funding support from the Commonwealth, the eight towns and others, we engaged multiple independent experts in education, public school finance, regionalization, and transportation. We began by benchmarking and analyzing the existing districts’ operations.

After concluding that the current models of operation were not sustainable – meaning that either tax assessments to the respective member towns would need to rise at increasing rates or programs and/or staff would need to be cut – our Board explored a broad spectrum of alternative models. Those models included full PreK-12 regionalization, regionalization of just the high schools, and expanded collaboration (See our research team’s full analysis of models and recommendations). We also reviewed historical efforts at collaboration and further regionalization (See our research team’s report on detailed history of those past efforts, mostly unsuccessful).

We also reviewed our research team’s detailed study of numerous educational indicators in both districts, which showed that our two districts had many more similarities than differences. We also studied reports on the districts’ finances (including OPEB liabilities, building facilities, and transportation issues).

In March 2022, our research team recommended merging the Berkshire Hills Regional School District and the Southern Berkshire Regional School District into a single preK-12 district, maintaining the existing elementary and middle schools as they are, but creating a new merged 9-12 high school to be built on the Great Barrington campus as the best path forward for our two districts. Following much deliberation, including three mediated board meetings that included representatives from the districts’ respective bargaining units, the Board selected that recommended model for further study and deliberation.

Over the last 16 months, the Board has studied the potential educational benefits to students of having a single district that is able to combine the best of both districts. It has also worked through the details of how a single district would work, including school committee governance, assessment methodologies, and other terms of a new regional agreement.

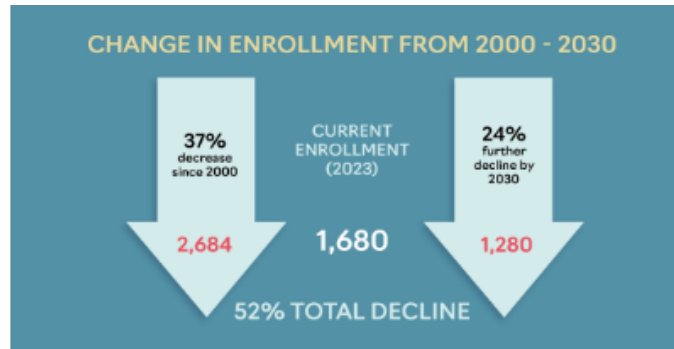
On July 18, 2023, our Board voted to recommend the formation of the new district subject to further review by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education of a Board-approved draft regional agreement. On September 26, 2023, the Board voted to approve the final draft of the proposed regional agreement and forward this recommendation report to the Select Boards of the eight member towns. As provided by statute, the Select Boards are to place this recommendation on the warrant of a special town meeting within thirty days of receipt of this recommendation.

Reasons for the Recommendation

Our Board determined that the best path forward for managing the educational and fiscal challenges of declining enrollment, rising operating costs, relatively flat state aid, and the increasing needs of our students is to form a new eight town district.

Here’s why:

- School enrollment in our districts has dropped significantly in recent decades and is projected to continue to decline. This has created increasing pressures on the ability of our districts and taxpayers to provide our students with the programming and support they need to succeed. Together, we would be much better positioned to efficiently manage these enrollment declines in a way that ensures a broad range of high-quality programs and services for our students.



- The recommended model would preserve existing elementary and middle schools while combining the two high schools in a newly constructed, state-of-the-art building designed for a 21st-century education.
- Combining our two districts would create economies of scale and efficiencies, with operating cost savings projected at \$1.2 to \$1.8 million a year.
- Students would benefit from educational enhancements and more opportunities, including six vocational programs and several innovative pathways. Participating students would gain skills that address local workforce needs (for example, early childhood education and care, horticulture/agriculture, and the trades).
- Students would have better and broader access to Advanced Placement courses, Early College, and electives (such as computer science and engineering).
- Students would have broader and better access to services supporting English language learners, special education, alternative education programming, and social-emotional-health services.
- Students would have more extracurricular options in sports, music, arts, drama, and clubs.
- More students would mean more robust (and potentially more competitive) athletic teams, including more junior varsity teams, and less of a need to form (and travel significant distances to) cooperative teams in other districts.
- A single district, while still relatively small, would offer a more diverse population of students, teachers, and staff, with greater opportunities for student, teacher, and staff peer support and networking.

The Educational Imperative

While we spent significant effort and attention on studying the fiscal implications of combining, we set educational benefits as our top priority. Our Educational Quality Subcommittee set three guiding principles:

- Ensure that all students in the 8 towns have equitable access to the broadest range of high-quality academic programming, enrichment activities, and targeted services.

- Ensure that faculty and staff have those resources, peer network, and learning experiences necessary to support students in a way that reflects contemporary, research-validated teaching and learning practices.
- Through combined efficiencies and scale, advance new programming that expands educational opportunities and improves student outcomes.

Guided by these principles, we determined that a single district, with a combined high school, would be able to achieve these educational benefits:

- **A new high school** that will reflect state-of-the-art teaching and learning spaces that support a range of student interests and pathways including arts, sciences, technology, and vocational programming; are flexible in supporting individual, small groups, and large community gatherings; meet the specialized needs of students such as counseling, mental health, special education, and academic intervention; and foster well-being and connections for students and faculty.
- **More educational choices, services, and opportunities** for students, including more and better student access to electives, AP classes, and early college courses; significantly expanded vocational-technical offerings, including innovative pathways and up to six chapter 74 career vocational-technical (CVTE or Chapter 74) programs; access to the full inventory of electives that range from robotics to engineering; and aligned resources to support diverse student learners (guidance, special education, English learners, social-emotional health).
- **Expanded access to enrichment and co-curricular activities**, including more and better access (including district-funded transportation) to sports, clubs, and civic engagement opportunities.
- **Support for teachers and staff** through increased professional development and training, a larger network of peers; and improved efforts at recruitment and retention (**including increased salaries for SBRSD teachers to bring them into parity with BHRSD teachers**).
- **Greater diversity in student body and faculty** providing the opportunity to create a culture of broader inclusion; reflecting diverse backgrounds and perspectives; ensuring a **critical mass** necessary to sustain and expand offerings; and increasing the network of peer mentors and allies among students and faculty.

Controlling Costs

The extensive financial analysis conducted by our research team concluded that combining the two districts – even accounting for the estimated cost of a new high school – is likely to cost the taxpayers of the 8 towns less than would the cost of remaining separate. This is because together we could **pool resources** and realize **economies of scale and efficiencies**. Specifically,

- The combined district could realize savings of \$1.2 to \$1.8 million/year. These savings could reduce future increases in town assessments or could be reinvested in educational enhancements.

- Class size and instructional resources could be optimized to ensure that students have access to courses through appropriate staffing levels.
- Centralized operations could lead to increased coordination for opportunities such as grants, partnerships with community organizations, and training of employees.
- A new high school constructed for an 8 town district would:
 - For SBRSD towns - avoid significant costs associated with CVTE (Chapter 74) tuition were students from the SBRSD towns to elect to attend CVTE programs at a newly constructed BHRSD 3 town high school. These town-borne costs are estimated at \$26,200 per student including transportation plus an additional component for capital costs. Projections suggest that the relatively modest cost to the SBRSD towns of a new high school (using the recommended methodology for assessment of debt service costs for that construction) would be significantly lower than potential costs associated with SBRSD students electing CVTE programming at the new high school (or another district).
 - For BHRSD towns - reduce their local share (after state reimbursements) of the construction costs as compared to their share of the cost of building the new high school for just the 3 BHRSD towns.

Balanced Assessment Methodologies

From multiple possible methodologies for both operating and capital costs considered, we agreed on a set of methodologies we believe to be fair and balanced for all eight towns.

- **Operating:** The operating assessment methodology selected achieves these important objectives:
 - no stark “winners” or “losers” among the 8 towns
 - “smoothers” to guard against large and/or disparate swings in town assessments from one year to the next based on fluctuations in student population or other factors, including:
 - a 5-year rolling average (currently used by SBRSD) of the state-calculated “required local contribution” (RLC) was utilized to determine each town’s assessments; and
 - a “safety valve” cap to ensure that no town’s operating assessment increases in any year by a percentage significantly higher than the increases in the other seven towns.
- **Capital:** The methodologies we adopted for capital assessments (which include new debt incurred for the new high school, the legacy debt of the SBRSD, and new debt that may be incurred by the new district at some future time) were similarly grounded in finding a solution reasonable from the perspective of all eight towns. The methodology had to take into account the fact that the BHRSD intends to build a new high school whether or not the two districts combine, and that but for the creation of a new combined district, the SBRSD would not build a new high school. The proposed methodologies achieve those objectives in the following ways:

- SBRSD towns would initially assume just 4% of the total construction cost of the new high school (or a little less than 10% of the local cost after application of expected state aid of about 55%).
- BHRSD towns would assume 41.5% of the total construction cost of the new high school (or a little more than 90% of the local cost after application of expected state aid of about 55%).
- SBRSD legacy debt would be assessed to the SBRSD towns through the remaining term of the current bond (2032).
- In 2033 (after all SBRSD legacy debt is paid off), the five SBRSD towns would pick up an additional 1% of the debt service costs on the new high school each year, reaching an SBRSD town contribution to debt service of just under 15% in 2038 and thereafter.
- All future capital debt would be shared by the eight towns pro rata based on their relative equalized value.

Transportation not a Barrier

Transportation concerns were raised early as a potential obstacle to a single district. Based on the report of an independent expert, and in consultation with a local provider, we determined that the transportation issues, while present, were manageable. Our independent expert, using bus routing software, concluded that the proposed model would result in “minimal” impact to cost and route/ride times and that therefore, *“transportation should not be a determining factor relative to regionalization and should not enter the educational decision-making process as to what is best for students.”* Specifically, the conclusions were:

- Elementary and middle school students would have bus rides that are substantially about the same, with some students slightly longer and some students slightly shorter.
- While some high school students would have longer bus rides, many students would have shorter bus rides.
- With the addition of some vans at modest additional cost, maximum time on a bus could be reduced from the current one hour to 45 minutes.
- That same investment would ensure most students would have bus rides shorter than 30 minutes.
- Elementary students (from the SBRSD towns) would no longer have to ride buses with high school students.

Conclusion

The first K-12 regional school in the Commonwealth was formed right here in Southern Berkshire over 70 years ago. It was the Southern Berkshire Regional School District. After arriving at the conclusion that the towns should join to form that new district, their planning board wrote:

...the Board has thoroughly investigated all phases of our school problem and gave careful thought to all possible solutions. It is the considered opinion of all who had the

privilege of working on this project that the advantages which would come, not only to our children, but to all the residents of the communities, under such a program would far surpass those we might expect from any other type of solution.

While much has changed since the 1950s, what motivated that planning board to make their bold recommendation was a desire to do what was best for the kids. The path they recommended carried some risk, but the risks of remaining separate were greater. We are at the same crossroads.

We too have conducted a thorough investigation of all possible solutions to the challenges our two districts face, one of the most critical being the narrowing of choices for our children – academic, extra-curricular, vocational, and friendships. These are foundational building blocks of our children's education, and they are lessening and limited by our very small and consistently shrinking grade sizes, particularly in high school. Combining our districts changes that trajectory.

As did the first planning board, we see that the educational and financial advantages that would come from combining our districts would well surpass what we might expect from any other solution.

Change is always hard. But change is coming, whether or not we combine. Our schools are simply too small, and they are getting smaller. By joining, we will be much better positioned with more resources and a broader community to give our kids the education, support, and choices they need and deserve.

Let's again make the right choice for our kids and for many generations to come.