

Interim Building Use Study Committee Final Report

This report contains:

- an overview of our total findings and our recommendations based on those findings;
- a SWOT detailing the costs and benefits of each of the options;
- Appendix 1 -3: reports on numbers of classrooms needed over time for each option using different sets of assumptions;
- Appendix 4: a worksheet explaining the number of classrooms available at each school;
- Appendix 5: a report on capital expenses pending at Buckland-Shelburne Elementary; and
- Appendix 6: Enrollment projections done during the BSE addition preparation, dated 8/11/1994. In that report the authors stated that the building plans assumed 10% growth in order to obtain funding from the state, despite projected decline in enrollment.

Overview

- I. The varied representation on this subcommittee was valuable. We had participants with interests that included (but not limited to) finance, facilities maintenance, safety, education, technology, and insurance. In addition, the ten member subcommittee represented seven of the eight district towns: Ashfield (2), Buckland (2), Charlemont, Colrain, Heath, Plainfield, and Shelburne (2).
- II. The subcommittee came to the disappointing conclusion that there is no easy solution to this complex problem; no “magic potion”. Of course, if there were, we are certain others would have identified it previously. We endeavored to find some good options solely from a building use (facilities) standpoint. The only elementary school capable of accommodating the regional model, Buckland-Shelburne Elementary, is the oldest school and the one in need of the most capital investment. However, there is much value in maintaining BSE as an operating school in any consolidation plan in order to keep options open for further regionalization. The K-12 model which brings all students under one roof, presumably at Mohawk Trail Regional School, will not “fit” in the near future, and with class sizes appearing to stabilize somewhat at 90-100 per grade level it does not appear to be an option in the longer term either.
- III. The proposition that the District should keep all schools open was a popular one but the committee found that “sharing” options garnered little, if any, new revenue and saved little, if any, expenses. If the District’s goal was to keep all schools open without new revenue or savings then “why are we here”?

Income from alternate uses of buildings.

We found that leasing portions or even whole buildings is not a viable option, since a) such income would be modest (maximum of \$9/s.f. times 12,000 s.f. currently available=\$108,000) and b) according to 963 CMR section 2.21, the state would claim most of that income in proportion to the amount they have invested in it; this applies to income from leasing or selling property. Our portion

of income from leasing space likely would not even cover the operating costs of the leased space. In addition, there is language in this section of the CMR which allows the state to demand repayment of the money they invested if the school is pulled from service without being used for 50 years! We speculate that the state might allow municipal, county or state use of buildings without penalizing us, if we petition for that through the Division of Capital Asset Management. Such use would generate essentially no income but towns or other users might be willing to share in operating costs of the building. Transferring ownership from the school district to a town requires approval from the state, if any town other than Heath (who owns the facility) wanted to take on their school building.

- IV. The subcommittee discussed capital planning and the importance of budgeting for regular maintenance and incremental capital improvements. More on this topic is discussed in Appendix 5.
- V. Planning for space needs and maintenance based on the “foundation budget” was discussed and raised many questions. Some on the subcommittee felt that if we were building a school “would we stop at the foundation” and suggested that the so-called “foundation numbers” should not be used as the benchmark for school budget planning. In spite of these concerns we did investigate space requirements (class sizes) using the foundation numbers as well as the recommendations from the Education Subcommittee. We came to realize that there are a number of factors which impact how many students can “fit” in any facility including, but not limited to, the class size, whether it is acceptable to send students from one Town or village to different schools, the acceptance of multi-grade classrooms, age levels housed at each school, whether space is dedicated for preschool, before- and after-school activities, and the need for specialist services. See Appendices 1-3 for how each set of assumptions affects how students fit in schools under each consolidation model.
- VI. We evaluated cost savings from “Mothballing” a building.
We came up with some guidelines for determining the operating costs saved when a building is not being used.
 - Grounds maintenance would cost about the same, except for savings on plowing. Minimal plowing (perhaps 30% of the current plowing budget) would need to be done to allow access to the building in case of emergency.
 - We would save most of the interior maintenance budget, though someone should check for leaks or other problems regularly. Maintenance of heating and ventilation equipment would need to continue.
 - We would save only a minimal amount on heat, assuming all schools already lower the temperature evenings and weekends like BSE does. The mechanical engineer who worked on Sanderson and Heath recommended dropping the heat to no less than 60 degrees, and the rule of thumb from the Department of Energy website is that 2% of heating costs are saved for each degree dropped. Since the temperature is already at the minimum 65% of the time, we would save 2% times 10 degrees times 35% of the time = 7% of heating costs. This is something of an overestimate at BSE (and possibly Sanderson), since one wing is already kept at the minimum all the time.

- Electrical use would go down substantially, but we are currently locked into a multi-year contract, and we were unable to study that contract to determine what savings would be possible in time for this report.
- Telephone use is also contracted. Once we reached the end of the contract we should save 100% on this item.
- Insurance on vacant buildings might cost a bit more than current coverage, but likely not a great deal more.

In sum, mothballing a building does not seem to provide significant cost savings, so saving money via consolidation relies on consolidating staff substantially.

VII. We found that predicting future re-use of school buildings as daunting a task as did the committees that preceded us. While some Towns have expressed interest in sharing or re-using buildings there are no specific proposals at the moment. There are many suggestions for re-use including, but not limited to, elderly housing, senior centers, libraries, health clubs, business incubators, offices for county/state/federal agencies, affordable housing, public safety buildings, town offices, magnet schools, satellite college or technical school branches, artist collaboratives, theatres, or preschools. However, there is concern about the real interest and public or private funding to accomplish it.

VIII. Considerable time and discussion focused on evaluating available space and determining space needs and class sizes based on the various models. There were three variations used: percentage of school capacity, a room-count formula, and an actual room-by-room, grade-by-grade, school-by-school study. We found a study using percentage of capacity to be flawed, and present our findings based on the latter evaluation methods. We should note that predicting future class sizes or enrollment is very difficult as evidenced by previous studies by others.

Conclusions

Given the above information, vacant buildings appear to cost nearly as much to operate as buildings that are in use. In addition, we would need to continue payments on building loans, and the state has the right to stop paying their portion of the building loans if the buildings are not used for educational purposes. Further study, including conferring with interested towns and the state, might open the door to municipal or other state-funded use of school buildings, but any real financial relief from that plan is hard to envision without transferring ownership (and hence costs) to the town.

This subcommittee strongly supports a Vocational-Technical program. It is our evaluation that the High School site is the best location for such a program to maximize the opportunity to share faculty and facilities. This appears to be the most viable shared use option that may also lead to new revenue. The location of the Central Office and the Walnut Hill program should remain flexible; those functions could be “fit” in around the educational programs once a model is selected.

Under any of the Option 1 (enhancement) models and a number of the Option 3 (consolidation) models, there is room in some or all schools for stand-alone additional programs, such as an educational collaborative; in all options except Option 2.1 (regional elementary) and a few of the consolidation options there is room for growth through enhancement of existing programs. See SWOT and appendices for details.

A number of consolidation plans would work from a building perspective. After analyzing building capacities (see SWOT and appendices for details), we have determined that Option 1.3 (K-8 at the elementary schools) would fit at all district schools and Rowe elementary, but K-8 does not appear to fit at Hawlemont in 2007-8, and might be a difficult fit in future years. Option 2.1 (regional elementary at BSE) for K-6 is not possible until at least 2010-11. However, K-5 would fit at BSE in 2007-8, with class sizes only a few students above the Education Subcommittee's recommendations, and with two classrooms available to provide flexibility in class size or for preschool. For Option 3.1 (consolidation models), we find that students would fit at the following school combinations: Heath and BSE, but only with the larger foundation class sizes at BSE; Colrain and BSE, using foundation or the Education Subcommittee's class sizes with mixed grades; Sanderson and BSE without moving Buckland students to Sanderson, using any class sizes; and Sanderson and BSE moving Buckland students to Sanderson, using foundation or Education Subcommittee class sizes with mixed grades. Students would not fit at Colrain if BSE was closed but the other three schools were left open regardless of class sizes without splitting up students from within a town (i.e., some Colrain students would have to go to Heath, or some Shelburne students to Sanderson). However, Sanderson, Colrain and Heath schools do have the capacity to house all students, if town lines were ignored. Among the possible options, class sizes would be most equitable in the near future for the Sanderson-BSE models.

Should any schools be identified for closure the District should promptly initiate a "Request for Proposals" process to identify the real options and interest in purchasing, re-using, or renting the facility.

Before making a final decision to close, re-use, or mothball a facility the District needs clarity from the Massachusetts School Building Authority about whether other municipal uses would qualify for continued state capital reimbursement and/or if there is a minimum educational use percentage and/or whether any use deemed for the "public good" would qualify. We were not successful in obtaining this answer.

In any event, the District needs to implement a preventative maintenance program and a capital planning process to identify, plan, and budget for capital needs in an organized manner. The District's facilities will age and all will need further investment to maintain their utility as educational resources into the future.

And finally, should the District elect to close one or more locations this subcommittee strongly recommends great care in not going too far, too fast, in terms of closures. For example, even if a model shows that eight classrooms are needed and there are eight classrooms available, that tight a plan poses potential future problems should a student population "blip" occur. In addition, some on the subcommittee are deeply concerned that, should the District divest itself of too many facilities, it could not accommodate an increase in student population should that occur in the 5+ year future. Since State regulations say that if a school is decommissioned they will not provide building funds for at least ten years after a closure, it is doubtful that the District would undertake building new facilities, and that could result in overcrowding at the remaining facilities.

