

Update on Exploration of Heath Joining Hawlemont Regional School District

In February of 2021, Heath was awarded a grant from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to provide funding to hire consultants, as needed, to provide more data to this exploration. Bob Gruen and Budge Litchfield had been asked by the Select Board to begin this study almost 4 years ago and although a good deal of work and progress had been seen, the opportunity for additional data was seen as very useful. When the grant was received, the Select Board asked Barbara Rode and Ken Rocke to join Bob and Budge in this exploration. Working as the Heath Regionalization Study Team (HRST) we went to work, meeting almost weekly from March to September 2021.

On Tuesday September 7, the HRST gave a detailed presentation to the Heath Select Board (and members of the public), describing our findings and sharing a summary from each Team member on where things stand now and what the future steps may be. On Thursday September 9 the Heath Regionalization Study Team voted to suspend most aspects of our study. This was a painful decision but as was clear from the data and facts we shared on Tuesday; we really had no choice. Locking the town into a long-term governance arrangement as described in the proposed draft regional agreement was just unacceptable. It is imperative to note that our decision to suspend aspects of the study was in no way a criticism or negative response to the fine work of the staff and administrators of the Hawlemont Regional School.

What are the implications for Heath's children and families? Basically, families still have all the same options open to them with no cost to the family other than transportation arrangements in "choice" placements. During the 2021-22 school year there need not be any changes to the educational arrangements currently in place. For the next school year ('22 – '23) students currently attending Hawlemont will be able to continue there as choice students, which means that transportation would need to be provided by families. Alternatively parents may choose to have their child(ren) attend a designated Mohawk Trail Regional School District (MTRSD) elementary school with transportation provided. Under the school choice law parents also have the option of having their child(ren) attend any local school which is accepting choice students.

This fall, Heath's school committee representatives to the Mohawk District, Barbara Rode and Budge Litchfield, will ask for parent and community input as to which MTRSD elementary school would make the most sense for us to designate as our partner school. Of the three elementary schools in MTRSD, Buckland Shelburne Elementary and Colrain Central School will be the two to choose between. Since we would still be members of MTRSD, transportation will be provided to that school, while all other options mentioned above will remain open to parents.

What were the findings or factors that led all four members of the HRST to decide that suspending most of the regionalization study was in the best interests of the people of Heath? First, it was clear to each of us that whether Heath students were enrolled at Hawlemont Elementary School or one of the MTRSD elementary schools they would be provided with a

very good education. There were several economic concerns that we learned about. We continue to investigate the question of the stability of Hawlemont finances including the status of normal reserve funds. This will be an important part of our final work. Due to the questions regarding the status of the reserves and simply because of the size of the District, be it two towns or three, an unanticipated large expense, such as an out-of-district special education placement could have devastating financial consequences. Another thing we noticed from the financial analysis was that there is no clear economic benefit to Heath for joining the Hawlemont Regional School District. Finally, there are some very concerning matters related to governance of the Hawlemont District. The proposed draft regional agreement contains two unique requirements for voting which do not conform with state law or regulations and would require special legislation to be enacted. First, for the school budget to be approved, all three town meetings would need to vote yes, state law specifies that only two thirds of the towns would need to vote yes. Second, although each of the two the school committee members from each town would have their votes weighted based on town population, for a committee motion to pass, at least one person from each town would need to vote yes. Therefore, even if the weight of the “yes” votes cast was over 50% without at least one “yes” from each town, the motion would fail. This would undermine the concept of one-person-one vote which weighted voting is designed to respect. The HRST felt that these two veto mechanisms were unworkable and could lead to repeated “log jams” of committee and District functions. Finally, we are concerned that the current Hawlemont School Committee is coming closer and closer to ending the shared administrative services arrangement with MTRSD. If this happens it would further separate Heath from the MTRSD, which we have been members of since it was formed in the late 1960’s.

Is there any work yet to be completed? Yes, as described above, a decision needs to be made about which MTRSD elementary school to partner with. Additionally, we have at least one very specific legal question that we are waiting for Town Counsel to respond to and there is a bit more financial analysis which will likely provide useful data to all parties even without the formation of a three-town regional district. We are sure a few other loose ends will pop up and we plan to meet on an as needed basis through the fall to work on all the items mentioned above.

This is a lot of information and your HRST has done a lot of work. It is with heavy hearts in many ways that we have come to the decision to suspend most of the study, but we firmly believe in our hearts that this is the right decision for Heath at this time.

Budge Litchfield for the
Heath Regionalization Team