



2D8T Sustainability Study

Project Work to Date

February 2025

What is the Sustainability Study?

In 2023, the Hawlemont and Mohawk Trail Regional School Committees obtained a grant to study and analyze the operating and organizational structures of the two regional school districts. In early 2024, the 2D8T (2 Districts, 8 Towns) Steering Committee was formed to work with a research team to further this study and explore potential options and opportunities. The goal is to advance solutions that ensure high-quality educational experiences for students in the 8 towns while reflecting the fiscal realities of our towns and residents.

The Steering Committee has volunteer representatives from each town, including town officials, school staff, and community members who are committed to excellence in education in our community.

Why is this Study needed?

The project is designed to address pressures that threaten our ability to ensure students receive a high-quality set of educational programs, co-curriculars, and services. These pressures include:

- **Enrollment:** From 1997 to 2025 combined enrollment in our two Districts has dropped 55%, from 1,971 to 885 students. While the drop in enrollment is slowing, further declines are expected.
- **Rising costs:** Meanwhile, both Districts have faced rising costs, especially in operations, transportation, technology, employee benefits, and special education. However, we have received very little in additional state education aid, which is tied to enrollment; indeed, we have had no meaningful increase in 20 years. As a result, towns (taxpayers) bear an increasing share of school costs.
- **Increasing challenges in providing the best possible educational experience:** As enrollment drops and the needs of our students increase, the imperative to offer a range of high-quality educational programs and supports becomes more challenging.

How was the Sustainability Study performed?

The 2D8T Committee teamed with the BERK12 Research Team to tackle this study in three stages:

- **Stage 1.** The initial phase involved understanding historical and current conditions in the Districts. BERK12 completed in-depth reports on education, finance and personnel, enrollment, facilities, and community outreach. BERK12 also prepared smaller briefs on a variety of other topics. Additional work included site visits, community meetings and surveys, focus groups, and meetings with staff and students.
- **Stage 2.** Drawing from these base materials and feedback from community engagement sessions, the Steering Committee explored a wide array of possible options and opportunities and, ultimately, developed a list of five operating options which it asked BERK12 to explore in depth, including maintaining the status quo. These options include:
 - **Option 1: No Change.** Examine the status quo with projections into the near future if the Districts remain as they are currently structured. No school closures. This represented the baseline for comparison.

- **Option 2: Districts Merge.** Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont Regional School Districts become a single PK-12 regional school district with 8 member towns. No school closures.
- **Option 3: Move 6th Grade.** Move all 6th grade students to Mohawk Trail Regional School (MTRS), making it a grade 6-12 school with a 6-8 middle school. All elementary schools become PK-5. Merged districts. No school closures.
- **Option 4: Consolidate elementary schools.** Three possible scenarios were developed within this option, including closing one elementary school, closing two elementary schools, or having all elementary schools consolidate at the Buckland-Shelburne Elementary site. BERK12 was asked to model each possibility with 6th grade remaining in the elementary schools and with 6th grade moving to MTRS. Merged districts.
- **Option 5: Single Campus.** All schools combine onto a single PK-12 campus at MTRS. Merged districts.
- **Stage 3.** BERK12 then worked to model the financial and educational outcomes under each option, compare the possible benefits and drawbacks of each, and facilitate additional community outreach and discussion of the information generated.

The results of these modeling efforts are being presented and discussed with town officials and community members at public meetings during late February and March 2025.

Results: What Did the Modeling Tell Us?

We examined models and scenarios across critical variables including education, finance/personnel, facilities, and transportation. High level findings include:

- The Districts have experienced ongoing enrollment decline and fiscal pressures. While enrollment decline is likely to slow, fiscal pressures will likely increase as expenses continue to outpace revenues. *These pressures will create ongoing budget gaps that will result in rising town assessments, reduction in educational programming and services – or both.*
- Significant fiscal savings and efficiencies can be achieved through consolidation (fewer buildings, fewer staff and lower operating costs). *Savings range from up to \$400,000 if the Districts continue to implement modest efficiencies, to as much as \$5.3 million if there is consolidation of elementary schools and/or creation of a single PK-12 campus.*
- Educational (academic/social/co-curricular) and professional experiences could be enhanced through consolidation efforts that combine grade cohorts into fewer buildings (or a single building). *Larger cohorts of students and staff will give all students access to programs/services (including, potentially, unique programs such as the Sanderson’s Mexican Exchange or Hawlemont’s HAY program); the expansion of peer networks; and, if desired, the introduction of new programming, such as world languages in the elementary grades and more career pathways in the high school.*
- While some consolidation models can be achieved in existing buildings, the larger scale options (significant school consolidation) will require facilities investments that are only achievable in partnership with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). *Investments may range from light upgrades, to renovation and/or new construction. In several models/scenarios, the capital outlay could be offset by savings in operational costs resulting from the consolidation. Construction involving partnership with the MSBA generally entails a timetable of 6-8 years.*
- A single elementary school or a single campus offers the most significant potential to advance educational quality, solve acute fiscal issues, and provide flexibility for long-term/ongoing organizational adjustments. *A single campus (achieved as renovation and/or new construction) could yield a contemporary PK-12 educational facility that efficiently utilizes existing resources, fully aligns*

current educational programming, creates broader opportunities to invest in additional programming, and offers flexibility for future decades.

If a single elementary school or a single campus is the selected option, transportation issues will need to be more thoroughly analyzed.

What's Next?

The most important next step is for all stakeholders – parents, students, staff, town officials and community members/taxpayers – to provide feedback to the Steering Committee: what are your perspectives, hopes and concerns? This information will be used to help the Steering Committee weigh the models/scenarios and select a direction to pursue further. This decision will then be referred to each School Committee for consideration and approval.

Any recommendation from the School Committees that requires a change to the regional agreement (*i.e.*, combining of districts, consolidation of schools, and/or reassignment of students) will require that **all 8 towns vote affirmatively** for a revised regional agreement at Town Meetings.

However, prior to that vote, much more work will be needed to equip voters with additional details. This will include:

- Ongoing efforts to improve current operations, such as changes to the middle/high school schedule and strategies related to student retention.
- Additional research that examines details of the selected model/scenario – such as additional fiscal modeling, and implications for transportation, special education, facilities, and post-employment benefits.
- Filing of a MSBA Statement of Interest (to secure potential reimbursement for a significant portion of renovation/new construction costs) and ongoing planning if the proposed renovation/construction idea is accepted by MBSA into the “eligibility phase” of its process.
- Educational visioning that engages stakeholders in collaborative planning for educational features/approaches if schools were to merge.
- Advocacy as related to ongoing rural funding, regionalization/reorganization incentives, and any required special legislation.
- Drafting of a regional agreement that defines key variables for the merged district, such as governance, fiscal apportionment, student assignment, etc., and acceptance of the new agreement by all towns.
- Ongoing community education and discussion throughout the process via informational materials, community meetings, informational videos, and web/social media.

In the last 14 months, great momentum has been achieved, and the Steering Committee and School Committees are firmly committed to building on that momentum to realize solutions that will give our children the education they deserve in a way that is fiscally responsible for our towns. Work is underway to secure the additional grant funding needed to support efforts to bring a recommendation to the voters. **The solution we seek is not to simply survive for the next two or three or five years; the goal is to position the Districts to thrive for the next generation.**

For more information visit 2districts8towns.org