



News Coverage

Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont Regional School Districts
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[Mohawk Trail, Hawlemont districts review restructuring options](#)

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BUCKLAND — The 2 District, 8 Town Steering Committee, or 2D8T, is seeking community feedback as it contemplates models for possible restructuring of the Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont Regional school districts in an effort to maintain or improve the experience of students while taking into account the fiscal limitations of the districts' small member towns.

The committee has started initial discussions on the models presented by the Pittsfield-based Berkshire Educational Resources K-12 (BERK12) research team, which was hired using funding from a \$250,000 Community Compact grant, and has six community feedback meetings scheduled in the coming months. Models look at the possibilities of closing elementary schools, consolidating to a single campus and/or merging the Hawlemont and Mohawk districts, as well as the impacts on the districts' finances, educational quality, facilities and transportation.

“Right now is an opportunity for us to take a pause and think about, is this the right structure, and if it's not, what is the best structure for the next 30 years,” Superintendent Sheryl Stanton said.

Model 1: No change

Jake Eberwein, the lead researcher with BERK12, said that while the districts may not consider any dramatic changes such as a school closure under Model 1, they may consider options such as reducing class sizes and altering the class schedules.

Model 1 could result in cost savings ranging from \$30,000 to \$671,500 and a reduction of five to 11 full-time staff positions. However, Eberwein noted he would not recommend cutting some of these positions unless the districts consider closing schools as they need more staff to manage more buildings.

Model 2: Districts merge

Under Model 2, the Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont school districts would merge into a single district. BERK12 said merging the two districts would have minimal to low impacts on educational quality, and could offer slight operational and cost efficiencies by allowing more positions and programs to be regionalized. This would result in savings ranging from \$30,000 to \$671,500 and a reduction of five to 11 full-time staff positions.

Steering committee members representing Hawley and Charlemont said they were not sure if residents would support a merger, as they are very proud of their elementary school, particularly its agriculture program.

“I think it would be advantageous to have one district, but I don't see it happening,” Hawley representative Ellen Purinton said.

Model 3: Move sixth grade

Under Model 3, sixth graders would move from their elementary schools to Mohawk Trail Regional School.

According to BERK12, moving the sixth graders from the elementary schools to a middle and high school would slightly impact the districts' educational quality. Students would benefit from receiving instruction from teachers who specialize in a single subject, as well as from having older student mentors nearby. Students would also be able to access additional extracurriculars, such as athletics.

The move could save the districts between \$30,000 and \$981,500 and result in a reduction of nine to 17 full-time staff members.

The existing building can accommodate additional students, but the BERK12 model also looked at what it would cost to create a new space for the sixth graders, as well as other improvements, such as a new fitness room and science labs. To create a new middle school wing would cost between \$5.6 million and \$8 million.

Model 4: Consolidate elementary schools

Should the districts pursue Model 4, it would mean closing one to three elementary schools. This model would have moderate to significant impacts on education, finance and transportation, and could save the districts an estimated \$1.5 million to \$5.2 million.

By having just one or two larger schools with larger class sizes, BERK12 believes teachers will be able to collaborate more effectively and give students access to more resources. Additional support personnel, such as school psychologists, will be able to see more students each day as they wouldn't have to spend time traveling to different schools. A larger school would also give students opportunities to develop friendships with students from other towns at a younger age. However, the BERK12 model noted that closing elementary schools would lead to more time spent on the bus for small children, create a loss of community pride for their small schools and leave empty buildings for the towns to repurpose. Depending on which elementary schools and how many are closed, there may need to be renovations at Buckland-Shelburne Elementary to accommodate more students, including potentially adding a second floor or building a new elementary school that can fit all the students.

Renovation costs could range from \$5.5 million to \$32.2 million, and building a new school could cost between \$59.1 million and \$84.4 million.

The steering committee's discussions centered around the possibilities, as closing one to three elementary schools included more variations — if consolidation is chosen, should the districts close Sanderson Academy, Colrain Central School, Hawlemont, multiple schools or all of them? Buckland-Shelburne Elementary is not being considered for closure, but as a location for consolidating students as it has the highest enrollment, the most space and is located in the most densely populated area.

“Whether it’s a renovated BSE or a new building, I think it makes sense to have an elementary school in the center of town where kids can walk to school,” Buckland representative Paula Consolo said. “I understand that it seems like these kids are benefiting and not these other kids, however I think it’s gold.”

Model 5: Single campus

All district elementary schools would close under Model 5 and Mohawk Trail Regional School would be renovated to create a single campus for all pupils. The Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont districts could save anywhere between \$3.4 million and \$5.3 million.

Eberwein said consolidating education to a single campus would allow for collaboration and sharing of resources across grade levels. Staff could be cut for efficiencies, since having the students in one location would mean not needing as many administrative or support staff, and with larger class sizes, there could be a reduction in the number of teachers needed. As many as 65 teaching positions could be eliminated, Eberwein said. The cost savings could be put toward offering new career programs and expanding existing programs, such as offering languages classes to elementary students.

However, creating a single campus would require renovations that could range in cost from \$51.5 million to \$110.3 million. This could include constructing a new building next to the existing school to house children in preschool through second grade, with correctly sized bathrooms and common areas.

Alternatively, the district could opt for an entirely new building that would house all students in preschool through 12th grade, replacing the existing Mohawk Trail Regional School. Building a new school could cost between \$100 million and \$145 million.

Throughout the conversation, committee members continuously stated that while they may have their own opinions on the reports, they need to make sure any decision made takes into account what community members want.

“We’re not here to say, ‘This is the way we want to go.’ We want to hear from folks,” said Mohawk Trail Regional School District School Committee Chair Martha Thurber. “We can’t do it alone.” After reviewing the five models, the next step for the steering committee is to present those models to the public for feedback. Six public meetings have been scheduled for students, parents and community members to ask questions and share their opinions. After receiving feedback, the committee will select a model to recommend to the individual school committees and create an action plan for Town Meeting voters.

“If we can get the community to give us a direction,” Stanton said, “we can craft a message.”

The meeting schedule is as follows:

- Tuesday, Feb. 25, 6:30 to 8 p.m. — Buckland-Shelburne Elementary School.
- Thursday, March 6, 6:30 to 8 p.m. — Virtual meeting on Google Meet.
- Tuesday, March 11, 5:30 to 7 p.m. — Sanderson Academy.
- Wednesday, March 19, 6:30 to 8 p.m. — Hawlemont Regional School.

■ Thursday, March 20, 6:30 to 8 p.m. — Mohawk Trail Regional School.

■ Wednesday, March 26, 6:30 to 8 p.m. — Colrain Central School.

More details on the five models can be found at [2districts8towns.org](https://www.2districts8towns.org).

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