



8 Town Regional School District Planning Board Update

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Merger Model under Consideration: Merge 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.

Board approves finance subcommittee recommendation on assessment methodologies: On June 6, 2023, the 8 Town board approved the most significant of the remaining substantive provisions of the draft 8 Town regional agreement – the assessment methodologies for the operating and capital costs of a merged district. The subcommittee’s recommendation followed more than 9 months of analysis of different assessment methodologies, including the methodologies the two districts currently use. The principles that guided those discussions were:

- The operating cost methodology chosen had to result in assessments for each of the 8 towns that were reasonable, with no stark “winners” or “losers,” and should include “smoothers” to guard against large swings in town assessments from one year to the next based on fluctuations in student population or other factors. (As those who attend town meetings know, assessments for district operating costs comprise the largest part of total district assessments by a wide margin.) One of those smoothers – the use of a 5-year rolling average of the state-calculated “required local contribution” (RLC) for each town to determine how much above the RLC each town will be assessed in any given year – has been used by the SBRSD for some time and has worked well. The approved operating cost methodology also includes a “safety valve” cap that operates to ensure that no town’s operating assessment increases in any year by a percentage that is significantly higher than the increases in the other 7 towns.
- The 5 SBRSD towns should be asked to contribute only a relatively modest portion of the overall cost of the new high school because, among other reasons, the incremental cost of building a high school for approximately 620 students (the estimated size of the combined high school) rather than 485 students (the estimated size of a Berkshire Hills high school were there no merger) would likely be something significantly less than the relative percentages of the high school students from the two districts (estimated 78% BHRSD students /22% SBRSD students). The methodology the board approved has the SBRSD towns assuming 4% of the total construction cost (or a little less than 10% of the local cost after application of expected state aid of over 50%), until 2033, when the 5 towns would begin to pick up an additional 1% of the debt service obligation each year reaching a 5 town contribution to debt service of just under 15% in 2038.

A presentation on the operating and capital cost assessment methodologies, including projections on total assessments (which include the estimated cost of the new high school and all legacy debt) is available [HERE](#), with a video recording [HERE](#).

Educational Quality subcommittee votes to recommend merger: A primary focus of the 8 Town Board since its formation in 2020 has been the educational advisability of a merger. On June 14, 2023, a majority of the educational quality subcommittee voted to recommend merger to the full board based on the subcommittee’s

development of a list of the potential benefits of a larger student body and pooling of district resources. That list included (among other potential benefits):

- A larger, more diverse student body allowing for more opportunity for social connections across town, socio-economic and other perceived divisions, and richer opportunities for diversity and inclusion;
- Additional resources to support diverse student learners (guidance, special education, English learners, social-emotional health);
- With a combined high school,
 - o More academic choices for students, including more and better student access to electives, AP classes, and early college courses, and more opportunities to achieve optimized class size;
 - o More extracurricular activities, including more and better access (including district-funded transportation) to sports, clubs, and civic engagement opportunities; and
 - o Significantly expanded vocational-technical offerings, including innovative pathways and up to six chapter 74 career vocational-technical (CVTE) programs;
- A larger, more diverse professional staff, with richer networking and professional development opportunities;
- Increased salaries for SBRSD teachers, providing opportunities for more successful teacher recruitment and retention;
- Expansion of early college and Advanced Placement opportunities; and
- Expanded early childhood opportunities.

In reaching its recommendation, the Educational Quality subcommittee noted the challenges that the two districts currently face in maintaining existing programs and services in the face of continuing declines in enrollment. And while recognizing the desirability of combining the special offerings in each high school, the subcommittee also identified areas of potential concern that will require careful focus during any transition, including maintaining consistent one-on-one student/mentor relationships – something both districts highly value – optimizing class size to allow for both personalized learning and multiple student voices for engaged classroom discussion, and engaging in a collaborative design of the facility and programming of the new high school .

Updated Timeline: Our targeted date for a board vote on the proposed merger, including a proposed regional agreement, is now late June/early July. If the board votes to recommend merger, we expect to be able to put that recommendation before the voters at special town meetings to be held this fall.

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