
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS
GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Blandford Chester Huntington Middlefield Montgomery Russell Worthington

TO: Blandford Selectboard
FROM: Dave Hopson, Michele Crane, Terri Garfield
SUBJECT: Gateway Regional Education
DATE: July 21, 2015
CC: School Committee

In the hope of reaching a consensus on how to move forward in a positive and collaborative means to address 'sustainability' issues between the district, Blandford's school committee members, and the selectboard, we put forth the following discussion points:

- I. In meeting with the selectboard in April, the school committee members were asked to address future sustainability issues regarding Worthington's withdrawal. The selectboard followed up this meeting with a letter addressed to the committee members. While the Blandford school committee members cannot independently set the direction of the school committee, there is currently a draft proposal for determining Gateway's future, including sustainability ([Gateway 2025](#)) that may be found on the district's website. This process involves gathering input from town officials as well as district employees, parents, students, and graduates. We are hopeful that officials from Blandford will participate in this endeavor.

- II. The selectboard has indicated publicly that they intend to hire a consultant to review options for Blandford to leave the district. We would hope that the selectboard and finance committee consider the following items during this process:
 - A. Worthington only moved forward with looking at leaving the district after gaining approval from an annual town meeting and continued getting that permission at every step in the process. Given the overwhelming support at this year's annual town meeting for passing Gateway's modified assessment--over the objections of the selectboard and finance committee--is it possible that town officials are moving forward without the consent of Blandford citizens?
 - B. There is a process in place to 'legally' withdraw from the district (which again requires a vote at a town meeting) under the regional agreement. Given some public statements from selectboard members about the agreement no longer being valid, we think it is important for the selectboard to obtain a legal opinion on that issue, as both the school committee's legal counsel and the DESE have stated that the regional agreement is still valid, legal, and must be followed.
 - C. The idea that the town will save significant money in being the second to leave the district rather than the last lacked any specifics in the newspaper articles. It would be informative if the entire population could have a more specific accounting of how the town would potentially save money as:
 1. Worthington's withdrawal is estimated to increase the average tax bill by \$400 without considering OPEB and retirement costs for Gateway. Given that

Blandford has no operating elementary school, does the selectboard feel that other districts will tuition in students, and the town will pay for transportation (as we do for vocational students) at a level allowing the town to reduce educational costs?

2. Is the selectboard indicating that they don't believe Blandford will owe any money in OPEB or retirement costs? If so, on what legal basis was this opinion developed and does this mean the selectboard also feels that Worthington doesn't owe this debt, which was incurred over the time that Worthington was a member of the district?
3. Given the legal costs the Town of Worthington is incurring, and will continue to incur, how is the selectboard accounting for these costs?
4. Is the selectboard planning on joining Worthington as a defendant in leaving the district rather than as a plaintiff trying to force them to acknowledge that the way in which they left the district is not legal?

III. There has been much reported on the 'crushing' costs of educating students at Gateway, that Gateway is currently not sustainable in its present model, and that the school committee is being uncollaborative. We'd appreciate you commenting on the following facts which were developed using publicly sourced documents including the Blandford Finance Committee report to the ATM, the district's budget document, and information from the Department of Revenue.

- A. While we agree that the year-to-year increase in assessments (from FY'15 to FY'16) is significant due to a number of factors (including the increase in Blandford's minimum required assessment) and is also due to Worthington's withdrawal (and the resulting decrease in revenue), we also point out the following:
 1. Blandford, at a special town meeting on June 25, used \$44,500 in allocated educational funding to balance other over-expended town accounts. The selectboard and finance committee seemed to be resistant to the idea of setting these funds voted for education aside in a stabilization account to even out the impact of changes in foundation funding for education and student enrollment.
 2. At that same special town meeting, \$75,174 was transferred from Free Cash to balance the town budget for FY'15 including a loan repayment.
 3. Again, at that special town meeting, \$108,505 was transferred from Free Cash into the Stabilization Account.
 4. At the annual town meeting, \$25,000 was raised and appropriated for the Reserve Account, \$55,000 was raised and appropriated for the Stabilization Account, and \$100,000 was raised and appropriated for the Building Stabilization Account.
 5. The total educational costs for Blandford are a significantly smaller portion of the town budget for 2016 than they were in 2010 (see finance committee figures showing a decrease from 62.8% to 51.2%) and for just Gateway, the decrease is from 58.2% in FY'10 to 46.8% as approved at the ATM.
 6. Even if the ATM had voted the total Gateway assessment without mitigation funding, the percentage of the town budget spent on Gateway in 2016 would still

have been lower by more than 8% than it was in 2010.

7. If the town had increased education funding by 2.5% a year (the number that's often thrown out as being 'affordable' under Proposition 2½) the total assessment would then be greater than the current FY'16 assessment without mitigation funding.

- B. Given that the town's percent of total town expenses spent on education has decreased significantly, that the ATM approved amount for education is substantially lower (by \$117,838) than what it would be if town expenditures for education had increased by 2.5% a year since 2010, the overall Gateway Budget for FY'16 is 2.48% or \$418,056 lower than for FY'15, that the town used \$44,500 in approved educational spending for town accounts, that the town set aside \$180,000 from tax revenue to fund reserve and stabilization accounts for FY'16, transferred \$108,505 from Free Cash to Stabilization and used \$75,174 from Free Cash to balance FY'15 accounts - how is the cost of educating our students the factor that is driving the town's finances in a negative direction? It would appear that the school district has done a good job of controlling expenses over the last decade while the town's expenses have dramatically increased for a number of reasons that we assume the selectboard and finance committee are addressing. Placing the financial blame on the education of our children, whether by Gateway or vocational schools, seems inappropriate, meant to negatively impact the perception of education by the general population, and appears to be adverse to the idea of reaching a common consensus on how to move forward in a collaborative fashion. So, is the school committee and district to blame for the lack of collaboration? Is the district truly financially 'unsustainable' if the percentage of town expenditures on education has decreased over the years? What is the vision of the selectboard and finance committee for the Town of Blandford given the general perception by many in the public that these two boards are simply against the very items that make Blandford unique: its history of supporting public education, collaboration with and between town officials, and ongoing support for the Springfield Ski Club, the Blandford Fair, and the Blandford Club (as recent examples)?
- IV. It was reported that the selectboard felt that spending the majority of the town's budget to support only 15% of the town's population was somehow not quite right. Given that research shows that the more education one has the better chance one has in being successful, that access to public education in the United States and Massachusetts is written into law, given that anyone who has received a public education has not paid back even a majority of the cost of said education in adulthood, that historically Diogenes stated that "The foundation of every state is the education of its youth" and that even a 'revolutionary' such as Malcolm X stated that "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today", and given the fact that it's well established that there are several things that are for the 'public good' and therefore paid for by all (including taxes for those items individuals may not support such as the military, roads, public water or sewer works, education), how does the fact that we pay for our children to be educated--as have citizens for many decades--have any bearing on whether we educate 15% or 50% of our population?