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

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TO: School Committee  
FROM: Dr. Hopson  
SUBJECT: GTAC Collaboration  
DATE: May 10, 2017  
CC: Leadership Team

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Last week I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Hemman (chair of the consulting group that visited us) regarding the MARS report and specifically related to the report's recommendations around budget issues. This seemed to be a topic of concern to Mrs. McVeigh at our last school committee meeting and was again brought up at the Russell ATM by Mr. Mason. The first recommendation regards implementing "a facilitated discussion of school district needs, municipal needs, and the financial assets and limitations of the member towns. This might also include a revised process for collaboration around the development of the annual school budget" (see below). Completing this process seems imperative before moving into the second recommendation of working with GTAC in the budget development process. My impression from Mrs. McVeigh was that she believed GTAC should be the facilitator for these events but Dr. Hemman was adamant that a facilitator/moderator should be someone experienced in the process, was not representing either the district or the towns, and that could be neutral in the process.

In reviewing this recommendation it appears that the MARS group was on target given the recent discussions and events surrounding the school budget. It also seems that completing this 'facilitated' event or series of events is necessary to reach a level of understanding and agreement that would potentially allow us to move forward with the second recommendation that "the School Committee and GTAC may wish to focus GTAC's purpose on budget deliberations and long-range capital planning." At this time the school committee has taken the first step to gather additional input from the towns through setting aside four school committee meetings to specifically allow time to develop the budget in conjunction with the towns. In fact the committee will potentially approve a letter from the committee to ask the towns to appoint individuals for this purpose at tonight's meeting. Although this is an excellent step in moving forward the intent of the MARS recommendation, the differences in understanding and the perceived negativity coming from both sides may make this process difficult to implement fully, or to fruitfully involve GTAC without completing a facilitated discussion of the overarching issues related to the development of town and school budgets, as well as capital plans. As I indicated at the April 26th school committee meeting, I do believe GTAC has a role to play in the process, especially in moving forward some initial work GTAC did months ago regarding capital planning.

I would therefore encourage the school committee, administration, GTAC members and town officials to work together to develop and implement a plan to provide a facilitated discussion or forum regarding budgets for all of the parties involved as a first step in this reconciliation process. This could establish a framework for moving forward in support of both the towns and the school district understanding the complexities of town and school finances. To reiterate, this would be a separate process from what the committee has

currently put into place for increasing communication and collaboration around the development of the budget for next year between the committee and the schools through the use of the four 'budget meetings' and different from the potential of having GTAC involved more directly in looking at school budgeting. To move this idea forward I would recommend that the school committee put this subject on its next agenda for consideration as 'new business'.

### **MARS Report Epilogue** **Region and Towns Interactions**

During interviews both administrators and teachers commented in an unsolicited manner on the sharp, negative dialogue from a small number of residents specifically related to funding the School District. It is recognized that school and municipal finance is often difficult and divisive. Clearly, the issue deserves debate between school and municipal advocates, but the level of this negativity has had at least two consequences within the District. One is that teachers are sometimes left with the sense that their work is not appreciated and the other is, school leaders are forced to address the issue and take steps to maintain morale. Further, it is difficult to imagine that this negative dialogue would help the perception and image of the member communities as they try to attract new families and homeowners.

This observation may lead district and municipal leaders to join in a facilitated discussion of school district needs, municipal needs, and the financial assets and limitations of the member towns. This might also include a revised process for collaboration around the development of the annual school budget. The District and Towns need to embrace the GTAC and Community Compact groups to support communication and economic development for these Hill Towns. They also need to encourage all the help and support from the Division of Local Services (DLS). We recommend that Superintendent Hopson not only reach out to municipal leaders but schedule meetings to ensure communication.