

Gateway Towns Seek Assistance Achieving Sustainability for Schools and Community

Over the past few years, a renewed effort for collaboration has been made by the six towns that make up the Gateway Regional School District. Blandford, Russell, Chester, Huntington, Montgomery and Middlefield are small Hilltowns located in Western Massachusetts. All six of these towns have suffered from loss of industry, a lagging real estate market, an aging population and declining enrollment in the regional school. Town and school officials have been reinvigorated in recent years by participating in a Community Compact through which the area has received grants and other assistance from the state.

In order to keep and maintain a thriving public school district to service these towns, officials have been working together to explore ways to be “sustainable.” Through a series of meetings facilitated by the Massachusetts Association for Regional Schools (MARS) town and school officials have already accomplished one big goal. A new equalized assessment method was developed for establishing the school budget which is being implemented for FY ‘19. Linked to that effort is work on updating the regional agreement for the district as well as other projects mentioned below.

Several of the unique ideas the towns and school are working on, would benefit from flexible thinking from state agencies to bring relief to this region. The economic situation in the Hilltowns is unique and it begs the need for new techniques and a fresh look at processes and regulations. This region is proud of how far it’s come and a core group of people have successfully created nice momentum. There is a strong desire to keep that ball rolling.

Pre school

The towns and school have collaborated on a new full-day pre-school program that began in the fall of 2018. All of our available slots are full and we are excited about this program as a way to draw more families to the district. It is hoped that folks from out of district might be attracted to Gateway by the pre-school and stay with Gateway for school choice, or even better, move in to the district. It was also a goal to make it a benefit for district employees who may want to have their children in pre-school right where they work. **This potential benefit for school employees cannot be realized at this time due to regulations on how we can run the program in terms of not being able to run preschool programs based both on a tuition and tuition free basis. As preschool does not qualify for school choice any slot filled with an out of district student would have to be ‘free’ under a tuition free state reimbursement option. Ideally the district would be able to have both tuition free and tuition programs to address this issue (going to a full tuition based program would negatively impact participation by those families that need this service the most).**

There are two simple solutions to this dilemma - make pre-school students eligible to participate in school choice programming or allow districts to get state reimbursement for in district

students as well as charging tuition for out of district students. The first option would entail some costs to the state, the second would incur no cost to the state.

MSBA Clawback

Several years ago, the Gateway Regional School District needed to close three school buildings in order to reduce the budget to a more affordable level for its member towns. The savings was reduced by the re-payment to the MSBA for new buildings and renovations funded by the state. State research was also behind the requirements for the size of the school which erroneously predicted population growth in this part of the state. The towns and the school district are hopeful that some portions of that repayment could be forgiven, **particularly because certain closed buildings are now being used by taxpayers as new town hall facilities. So while we are not currently paying MSBA back for the Worthington Elementary School (as the town of Worthington has reopened this school) we are also not being reimbursed by Worthington for Other Post Employment Benefits due to the manner in which the state allowed Worthington to unilaterally withdraw from the district through legislation. We are paying back the MSBA for the Blandford Elementary School Building although this building is now being used at full capacity for municipal purposes. We are also being charged for the Russell Elementary School Building despite the fact that portions of this building are also used for municipal purposes. Given the desire by the state for schools to become more efficient, consolidate buildings, and become more sustainable, the fact that the MSBA recoups funds for buildings used for municipal purposes seems counter to these efforts. If decreasing population in Western Mass continues it would make sense to eliminate payback in order to make districts be able to consolidate further without state penalties especially where local municipalities are struggling to find additional space, update municipal buildings, or find alternative uses for closed schools.**

Transportation Reimbursement

Would request funding be at 100% as the law intended. Would also like reimbursement for special education transportation, or have transportation incorporated into circuit breaker funding. Would request 100% reimbursement for homeless transportation as well.

Regional transportation reimbursement was used as a 'carrot' to get schools to consolidate into regional school districts but the state has seldom funded it at 100% (the law is subject to appropriations). While some state officials have indicated that funding at 100% would cause inefficiencies and decrease regional school efforts to contain costs there have been no changes in the reimbursement process that would reward schools (such as Gateway) for reducing overall transportation costs. There should be an incentive built into the reimbursement for school districts that are able to contain, or reduce, regional transportation costs. As it stands now, you are penalized for becoming more efficient: although it saves money for the current year, it also yields a lower reimbursement the following year. For districts like Gateway who have worked with the MASBO transportation group; looked closely at and revised transportation routes; and reduced busing by substantial amounts, there is no pat on the back or fiscal incentive through

the reimbursement mechanism to support such efforts. Perhaps that would be an incentive to help gather support for a higher reimbursement percentage.

Broadband, technology needs

The state needs to continue supporting the idea that broadband access needs to be ubiquitous in all areas of the state so that the use of technology is fair and equitable in every school district. The pace of change in technology, the ever-increasing need for additional bandwidth by schools, the transition to electronic MCAS testing and the rapid movement to online learning makes it imperative that the state increase its support for technology infrastructure improvement and the acquisition of computers for every school district.

Sharing services with towns

There have been some quick discussions of the school district and towns sharing specific functions as the next step from the towns sharing services. The following have been mentioned in the past but there may be many more.

- Sharing IT services through PVPC process especially related to cloud storage and backup, archiving communications, websites and social media as public records, technical expertise in planning expansions, and support services.
- Sharing basic back office services such as payroll, personnel benefits, and accounting/bookkeeping.
- Sharing specific staff between the district and towns such as:
 - Grant writer
 - School Resource/Police Officer
 - Public relations

Green Community Grants

With our towns being designated as “Green Communities” can we move forward with seeking grant money through the towns for boiler replacement at the middle/high school complex?

Chapter 70 Reform

There has been much discussion about rolling transportation reimbursement into the Chapter 70 formula and recently some discussion about including small/rural school funding into Chapter 70. There are benefits and drawbacks to these suggestions but at the minimum we should consider continuing to support small/rural school aid.

Unfunded Mandates

Rather than list unfunded mandates, which seem to grow in number each year, we've [linked](#) to the document put together across the state for your review.

For Gateway the largest and newest ‘unfunded mandate’ is the result of the state allowing Worthington to withdraw without any consideration of OPEB and retirement costs. From our FY’17 audit we can see that our OPEB/Pension liability amount is \$13,128,685 (OPEB is

\$7,218,335 and Pension is \$5,910,350). Even upon the date of withdrawal with approximately 7% of the students (with much higher numbers over the years) the state has imposed an unfunded mandate on the remaining towns of approximately a million dollars. As we've failed in our legal attempts to have the separation process overturned it may be time to approach the state to allocate funds to the district to hold us harmless for this unfunded mandate that is a direct result of state action that circumvented the regional agreement process for withdrawal of a town.