MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS
Facing Financial Unsustainability
Organizing a Lobbying Structure

Presented by Superintendent Michael A. Buoniconti
Mohawk Trail Regional School District / Hawlemont Regional School District
March 23, 2016
Discuss whether the time has come for rural school districts to organize and lobby for peculiar common interests
If there is a consensus to move forward, discuss organizational options and plan next steps
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOBF9_gH5u4
MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

WHAT IS RURAL?

National Center of Education Statistics

- Defined relative to urban areas

- Locale code 43: Rural Remote
  - None in Massachusetts

- Locale code 42: Rural Distant
  - Mohawk, Southern Berkshire, Quabbin

- Locale code 41: Rural Fringe
  - Quaboag, Ware, Tantasqua

- Locale code 32: Town Distant
  - Gill-Montague, Greenfield

- Locale code 31: Town Fringe
  - Lee, Lenox, North Adams

- No consensus definition of rural
Rural School Districts in 12 of 14 Massachusetts counties
RURAL PROFILE

- Rurals comprise 19% of MA public school districts
  - 77 of 406 Public School Districts
    - 39 Regular School Districts
    - 32 Regional School Districts
    - 6 Vocational-Technical School Districts
- Rurals comprise 9% of public school student population
  - 85,386 students enrolled in rural school districts
- Rurals comprise 69% of the geographic footprint in MA
  - Excludes rural charter schools and virtual schools
Another 17+ towns (distant & fringe) “look like” rural school districts

- Athol-Royalston
- Brookfield
- Clarksburg
- Deerfield
- Erving
- Frontier
- Gill-Montague
- Lee
- Lennox
- Martha’s Vinyard
- Nantucket
- Oak Bluffs
- Provincetown
- Ralph C. Mahar
- Sunderland
- Tisbury
- Williamstown
- Others

Students per square mile (density factor) key rural attribute
MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

QUALITY OF EDUCATION

- 85 of 94 districts (90%) either Level 1 or Level 2
  - 17 of 94 districts (18%) Level 1 School Districts
    - Equal to state percentage (18%)
    - 16 of 17 districts (94%) are single school districts
  - 68 of 94 districts (72%) Level 2 School Districts
    - 13% higher than state percentage (59%)
    - 23 of 68 (34%) include Level 1 schools

- Rural schools are outperforming state percentages
MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS AT-RISK

- Declining enrollment
- Flat Chapter 70 state aid
- Increasing actual expenses
- Upward spiraling town assessments

- Rural school districts financially unsustainable in current operating conditions
MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

DECLINING ENROLLMENT

- 66 of 94 districts (70%) declining enrollment from 1996 to 2016
  - Provincetown: 66% decline
  - Hancock: 57% decline
  - Hawlemont: 53% decline
  - Gateway: 48% decline
  - Shutesbury: 47% decline
  - Savoy: 46% decline
  - Rowe: 43% decline
  - Gill-Montague: 42% decline
  - Mohawk Trail: 40% decline
  - Leverett: 39% decline

• Statewide enrollment has stabilized at approximately 950,000 students
MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

FLAT CHAPTER 70 STATE AID

- 50 of 94 districts (53%) ≤ 2.5% annual increase between 2006 and 2016
  - Berlin: 1.3% average annual decline
  - North Brookfield: 0.4% average annual decline
  - Mohawk Trail: 0.1% average annual decline
  - Hawlemont: 0%
  - Sunderland: 0%
  - Athol-Royalston: 0.2% average annual increase
  - Mount Greylock: 0.2% average annual increase
  - Gateway: 0.3% average annual increase
  - Gill-Montague: 0.3% average annual increase
  - Martha’s Vineyard: 0.4% average annual increase

- Actual expense increases greater than 2.5% annually
MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

LARGE GEOGRAPHIC FOOTPRINT

- 26 of 94 districts (28%) > 100 square miles
  - Franklin County Voc-Tech 566 square miles
  - Martha’s Vineyard 351 square miles
  - Mohawk Trail 253 square miles
  - Southern Worcester Voc-Tech 253 square miles
  - Northern Berkshire Voc-Tech 232 square miles
  - Central Berkshire 214 square miles
  - Whittier Voc-Tech 202 square miles
  - Southeastern Voc-Tech 196 square miles
  - Ralph C. Mahar 195 square miles
  - Up-Island Regional 183 square miles
MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

MOHAWK’S GEOGRAPHIC FOOTPRINT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOHAWK TRAIL REGIONAL</th>
<th>Land Area</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashfield</td>
<td>40.30 sq mi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buckland</td>
<td>19.56 sq mi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charlemont</td>
<td>26.10 sq mi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colrain</td>
<td>43.38 sq mi</td>
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<td>Hawley</td>
<td>30.86 sq mi</td>
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<td>Heath</td>
<td>24.91 sq mi</td>
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<td>Plainfield</td>
<td>21.05 sq mi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rowe</td>
<td>23.55 sq mi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelburne</td>
<td>23.25 sq mi</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>252.96 sq mi</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10 LARGEST BY POPULATION</th>
<th>Land Area</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>48.42 sq mi</td>
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<td>Lynn</td>
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<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>6.97 sq mi</td>
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<td>Newton</td>
<td>18.06 sq mi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall River</td>
<td>31.02 sq mi</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>240.33 sq mi</strong></td>
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MA RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

LOW DENSITY FACTOR

63 of 94 districts (67%) density factor < 20 students per square mile

- Franklin County Voc-Tech 0.9 students per square mile
- Savoy 1.2 students per square mile
- Hancock 1.2 students per square mile
- Farmington River 1.4 students per square mile
- Petersham 1.8 students per square mile
- New Salem-Wendell 1.8 students per square mile
- Hawlemont 1.8 students per square mile
- Martha’s Vineyard 1.9 students per square mile
- Up-Island Regional 2.1 students per square mile
- Northern Berkshire Voc-Tech 2.1 students per square mile
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FINANCIAL UNSUSTAINABILITY

- Increasing costs
- Flat Chapter 70 State Aid
  - Declining Enrollment
- Increasing town assessments
Ideas Percolating in Mohawk

• Revenue Ideas:
  1. Create rural state aid
  2. Create rural transportation aid

• Savings Ideas
  1. Enable building consolidation/ modification (MSBA)
  2. Enable building and transportation savings (DESE)

• Need to gather ideas across Commonwealth and form platform
Create rural state aid (beyond Chapter 70)

1. Idea for consideration: Sparsity Aid (Wisconsin Model)
   - $300 per student 2015-2016 school year (began in 2007)
   - Recommended by Superintendent’s Rural Schools Advisory Council
   - Eligibility: < 725 students and < 10 students per square mile
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EY ISSUE: STATE TRANSPORTATION AID

Create rural transportation aid (beyond Chapter 71)

1. Idea for consideration: Low Density Transportation Aid
   • Districts with < ### of students per square mile eligible
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KEY ISSUE: EXCESS CAPACITY

- Enable financially viable building consolidation
  1. Idea for consideration: Legislation that would free rural school districts from MSBA “claw-back” provision
  2. Idea for consideration: Create access to MSBA-like grants to re-purpose consolidated schools
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KEY ISSUE: OPERATING EXPENSES

Reduce building and transportation expenses

1. Idea for consideration: Hold Harmless Chapter 71
   - Allow districts to reduce transportation expenses without reducing Chapter 71 transportation reimbursement
   - Enable dollar for dollar savings, not 40 cents on the dollar

2. Idea for consideration: Enable modified school week
   - Example: 4-day school week
   - 180 days OR time on learning hours (not AND)
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NEXT STEPS

- To organize or not to organize a lobbying instrument for rural school districts

- If yes, schedule organizational meeting
  - Invite rural superintendent representative from each county?
  - Representative appointed by county rural superintendents?

- Draft agenda for organizational meeting
  - Draft mission statement
  - Discuss organizational structure
    1. Rural Superintendent Network within MASS
    2. Rural Subcommittee within MARS
    3. Independent Rural Superintendents’ Roundtable
  - Set meeting calendar
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THANK YOU!!

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