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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Wilkins School Project has now failed at the ballot box four times despite multiple redesigns and cost reductions. While it began as a response to longstanding space constraints and aging infrastructure in Amherst's elementary schools, the project's persistent failure to gain voter approval reveals deeper issues that transcend design or price. Voter resistance stems from a combination of eroded public trust, demographic realities, governance challenges, and an increasingly unfavorable political and economic climate for large-scale public education investments.

Enrollment across Amherst has largely stabilized or declined. Home sales and birth rates—leading indicators of student yield—have fallen significantly, and the surge of post-pandemic migration has receded. Meanwhile, the Souhegan High School campus operates well below capacity, with up to one-third of its classrooms unused during any given period. Yet despite this available space, the option of relocating seventh and eighth grades to the high school campus has been repeatedly sidelined, mischaracterized, or ignored.

This configuration is explored in greater detail not because it is presumed to be the definitive solution, but because it remains one of the few viable options that has not been seriously analyzed over the past 25 years. Nearly every other configuration—including new construction, additions, reconfigurations, and grade shifts—has been reviewed at some point during that time. Given the district's ongoing facility challenges and financial constraints, this option warrants thoughtful consideration as part of a broader, long-term strategy. This analysis aims to address as many questions as possible and to dispel common myths and misconceptions—contributing to its length. While some sections may appear to favor relocating seventh and eighth grades, the purpose is not to present it as a foregone conclusion, but to argue against dismissing it prematurely without a thorough evaluation.

In addition, a number of voters in the community have made clear that they need an answer to the question of excess capacity at the high school before they can support such a large-scale construction project. That answer could take the form of a clear strategic plan for how space across the system will be used if the proposed plan is approved, or a more direct effort to address current space constraints using that existing capacity. Either way, it is a key question that must be addressed head-on.

Governance considerations are central to any such transition. Maintaining grades 7–8 under Amherst would simplify labor transitions due to existing union affiliations, whereas integrating them into Souhegan could allow for more seamless resource sharing and academic continuity across grades 7–12. While this shift would involve navigating complex staffing transitions—such as a reduction-in-force and rehire process due to differing labor structures between Souhegan's flexible Policy Planning Committee (PPC) model and Amherst's NEA collective bargaining agreement—it may also offer a more sustainable long-term framework for education delivery and fiscal management.

Importantly, this approach could offer much-needed flexibility during a time of uncertainty. It could help relieve overcrowding at the elementary level, reduce the scale of any necessary

renovation at Wilkins, and buy time to reassess governance structures, monitor enrollment trends, and rebuild community trust. It could also promote greater equity between Amherst and Mont Vernon by granting both towns shared governance over grades 7–8, which Mont Vernon currently lacks despite funding tuition for those students.

While this concept may ultimately prove untenable—due to infrastructure limitations, staffing constraints, or community resistance—it warrants careful exploration. This document recommends a full feasibility study to rigorously evaluate the option, including assessments of facility capacity, curriculum alignment, staffing logistics, student experience, and total long-term cost. It does not argue for inaction, but for a more integrated and responsive planning process—one that reflects current realities and keeps future options open rather than locking the district into an inflexible or potentially unsustainable path.

It is also important to acknowledge that pursuing this configuration would require a tremendous amount of coordination, negotiation, and persistence. The labor implications alone—including contract realignments, potential reduction-in-force proceedings, and cross-district staffing transitions—would be complex and time-consuming. The logistics of program design, student support, transportation, and scheduling would also demand careful planning and broad stakeholder engagement. By contrast, the proposed construction project may represent a more *pragmatic* solution—one that checks all the boxes for capacity, modernization, and educational environment, and can be implemented with fewer institutional disruptions. However, it would also reinforce the status quo, leaving unresolved many of the persistent concerns that have challenged school facility proposals in this community for more than 25 years: inequities in governance, limited strategic cohesion across grade levels, and ongoing skepticism about long-term sustainability. Exploring an alternative configuration—though undoubtedly more difficult—may prove the more *prudent* course. It requires a longer-term lens, but it is the only way to ensure we are not simply building around the same issues rather than confronting them directly.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE PATH FORWARD

The Wilkins School project has reached a pivotal moment. After four failed bond votes and years of shifting proposals, the district must consider a more adaptive and sustainable path forward. The following recommendations reflect the report's findings and provide a strategic framework for addressing school facility needs in a way that is educationally sound, fiscally responsible, and politically viable.

Pause the Current Wilkins Rebuild Proposal
While time is of the essence, rushing forward with the same plan for a fifth time risks yet another year of delay. We've been told repeatedly that the Wilkins building is in critical condition—yet after each failed vote, operations continue as before. If the need is truly urgent, it's all the more important to put forward a plan the community can support. Unless a viable compromise can be placed on the ballot by March 2026, a brief delay offers the district a chance to reassess current conditions and consider more adaptable, cost-effective alternatives—without permanently foreclosing future options.

Pushing the same proposal again, despite repeated public rejection, risks locking the town into an oversized and potentially underused facility, all while public trust erodes and enrollment stagnates—or declines. Taking a short pause is not inaction—it's a strategic step in response to economic uncertainty, political volatility, and long-term demographic shifts. Listening to the community and updating the plan as needed is not just prudent—it's essential.

Conduct a Full Feasibility Study for Consolidating Grades 7–8 at Souhegan
Preliminary analysis suggests that relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan High School campus is operationally viable from a space utilization standpoint. However, this conclusion is based on generalized assumptions and must be tested through a formal feasibility study. This next phase should assess:

- Curriculum and scheduling alignment
- Programmatic needs and staffing models
- Infrastructure modifications for age-appropriate use
- Food service and library expansion needs
- Security and transportation implications

A coordinated study would allow the district to fully evaluate the viability of this option before committing to any large-scale facility projects.

Align Facility Planning with Science Lab Modernization and Potential Campus Expansion
As the district contemplates overdue upgrades to Souhegan's science facilities, this creates an opportunity to design a comprehensive expansion that meets multiple needs at once. Investments in a new auxiliary gym, cafeteria expansion, and a connecting structure between the main building and Annex could both improve Souhegan's instructional environment and make space available for additional grade levels. This strategic alignment could reduce future capital costs and increase project efficiencyWilkins Project Analysis

Address Deferred Maintenance Districtwide
Any proposed project must be part of a broader strategy to tackle deferred maintenance at all school facilities. Community trust has been eroded by years of underinvestment and piecemeal planning. A transparent roadmap should be developed to:

- Prioritize essential repairs at Wilkins, AMS, and Souhegan
- Identify bundled projects to maximize efficiency

Communicate trade-offs to the public clearly and honestly

Reengage in Governance Reform Conversations
Although previous efforts at consolidation stalled due to political challenges, the potential long-term benefits of a unified Pre-K–12 structure remain. Even without full reconfiguration, efforts should continue to align policies, contracts, and administrative functions across the districts to improve efficiency and equityWilkins Project Analysis.

Rebuild Community Trust Through Transparency and Accountability
Future initiatives will require stronger community support. To achieve this, district leaders should:

Avoid perceptions of bias or manipulation in public communications

- Respond to feedback with humility and openness
- Ensure all proposals are accompanied by clear, data-driven rationale

Create processes that proactively include all stakeholders

THIS IS A COMMUNITY-WIDE DECISION

While the Amherst School District may genuinely believe its current proposal serves the best interests of its students, it's important to remember that Amherst is just one part of a broader educational and civic ecosystem that also includes Mont Vernon, Souhegan, and the town's municipal priorities. Increasingly, however, the district appears to be operating on a more insular process—one that may limit outside perspectives and misinterprets legitimate questions as threats. Rather than engaging with the wider community to build trust and consensus, the district has narrowed its lens, seeming to view criticism not as constructive feedback, but as a threat to be discredited. This defensive posture has fostered a tendency to distrust external input in favor reinforcing internal assumptions. But school facilities are not just district assets—they are community assets. Any plan that seeks long-term success must be grounded in shared ownership, open dialogue, and a willingness to confront difficult truths. Ignoring dissent won't make it disappear—it only deepens the divisions that have prevented this project from moving forward.

Path Forward
To assist in comparing the district's available paths forward, the following matrix provides a strategic overview of each option's relative strengths and vulnerabilities. This is not intended as a cost estimate or construction timeline, but rather as a tool for understanding key trade-offs across four critical dimensions:

- **Governance Impact**- Does the option require changes to district-level governance structures, such as shifting operational control or renegotiating inter-district agreements?
- **Academic & Programmatic Benefit**- Will the approach expand student access to programming, improve instructional alignment across grade levels, or offer more flexible teaching structures?
- **Flexibility for Future Growth**- Can the option accommodate changes in enrollment, respond to evolving political or economic conditions, or preserve options for future adjustment?
- **Community Risk** - What is the likelihood of the option provoking public backlash, failing at the ballot, or further eroding public trust?.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, the Amherst School District has made four attempts—each unsuccessful—to secure public approval for a major school construction bond. In New Hampshire, such bonds require a 60 percent supermajority to pass. Since 2022, the district has presented three iterations of the proposal across four ballot cycles: the first received just 38 percent support, the second 44 percent, and the two most recent attempts—identical in scope—each failed narrowly, garnering approximately 54 percent of the vote. Despite repeated efforts to revise and scale the project, it has yet to meet the threshold required for passage.

Election Results			
Date	**Vote**	**Total**	**% In Favor**
2025	Yes	**1987**	54.66%
	No	1648	
2024	Yes	**1683**	54.05%
	No	1431	
2023	Yes	**1549**	43.88%
	No	1981	
2022	Yes	**1193**	38.55%
	No	1902	
2021	Yes	Delayed	NA
	No		

The failure of these bonds cannot be chalked up to cost alone. Rather, they reflect long-standing tensions surrounding governance, transparency, and public trust. Legal setbacks, economic headwinds, demographic shifts, and a series of contentious administrative decisions have all contributed to growing voter skepticism. As this report will explore, charting a viable path forward requires more than new architectural plans—it demands a candid reassessment of the district's structural, political, and cultural landscape.

BACKGROUND

COMMUNITY TRUST

The quest for an answer to the elementary school's space issues goes back to at least 1998, when a "bond issue to fund the building of an upper elementary school addition to the middle school which would have housed the combined grades of 4th and 5th" failed to gain voter support. Over the past two and half decades, multiple such projects have been attempted and most have failed. The goal of this section is not to re-litigate the past, but to acknowledge the context in which public perception has formed. Rebuilding trust begins with transparency and a willingness to learn from prior experience—not with assigning blame.

Community trust plays a crucial role in the success of any large-scale school initiative, particularly when significant taxpayer funding is required. In Amherst, however, long-standing concerns about administrative decision-making and perceived disregard for public input have eroded confidence in the district's leadership. This section examines the historical and recent factors that have contributed to this erosion of trust, highlighting the challenges the district faces in rebuilding community support for future projects.

Compounding these challenges for the school system was a preexisting sense of mistrust between town residents and the Amherst School Board, stemming from questionable decisions made in the past, such as:

Birch Park
In early 2001, the Amherst School District purchased 21.56 acres of land at 13 Baboosic Lake Road—near the Route 101 interchange—for $546,000, with the intention of building a new elementary school on the site. However, the project was ultimately abandoned due to legal disputes with neighboring property owners and lingering concerns about the site's overall suitability. Today, the land serves as home to the Amherst Recreation Department's pump track and disc golf course. For many in the community, the outcome of this project has come to symbolize a deeper, systemic failure of due diligence—and continues to cloud perceptions of the School Board's credibility.

Full-Day Kindergarten
In 2015, the Amherst School Board proposed a warrant article seeking funding approval for a full-day kindergarten program. After the article was rejected by voters with a vote 1086 for to 1782 opposed, the school administration reallocated funds within the existing budget to implement the program regardless. Some of the shifted funds came from eliminating the school's two reading specialists. Although it was technically legal, many residents viewed this as a violation of the principle that "no means no," feeling it disregarded the voters' clear rejection of the program. As a result of moving to a full-day program, the number of rooms and teachers required for kindergarten doubled.

Failing to maintain and update existing facilities
As the discussion over the need for a new school evolved, questions arose about why the Wilkins School building had fallen into such disrepair. Photographs were displayed of photocopiers in the bathroom and extension cords running through the ceiling—clear code violations. Additional concerns were raised about the lack of attention given the portable classrooms, which were reported to be at the end of their usable life. Some residents accused the administration of intentionally neglecting maintenance of these facilities to dramatize the need for a new school, further eroding trust within the community

Administrative Restructuring
In the fall of 2021, several significant changes were made to restructure the administration. The School Administrative Unit (SAU)—the central office that houses the superintendent and oversees district-wide operations—added a second assistant superintendent, ostensibly to divide the responsibilities of managing a complicated school system. Under this new arrangement, the existing assistant superintendent would oversee the elementary schools, while the new assistant superintendent would coordinate the middle school and high school programs.

Additionally, the high school administration was reorganized, eliminating the assistant dean of faculty, two instructional coaches, and department chairs. In their place, the district implemented a new structure by hiring administration-level department directors, referred to as "domain leaders." This move was particularly controversial, as it was seen as contrary to the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) philosophy. The addition of a set of middle management was viewed as antithetical to CES's traditional flat hierarchy and commitment to a democratic management system.

These administrative changes were viewed by many as an attempt by the central SAU office to compensate for a lack of experience within the leadership team by expanding administrative roles. The administration defended the restructuring, claiming that additional supervision was necessary because "the school had been managed for too long with all carrot and no stick."

However, this rationale only deepened concerns that the SAU was prioritizing bureaucratic oversight over fostering collaboration and trust. The decision not only highlighted potential gaps in leadership expertise but also fueled skepticism about the alignment of administrative priorities with the district's core educational values.

Revolving Door Administrators

At the same time as the restructuring was taking place, the school system experienced an alarming level of turnover among administrators. Over a period of just a few years, every administrative position at every school had turned over at least once. At Clark-Wilkins, three principals departed in rapid succession, including one who resigned just days into the school year, and another who later requested reassignment to the assistant principal role. At Mont Vernon Village School, three principals cycled through—one was reassigned to assistant principal at the middle school, while another left abruptly. The middle school principal retired and was replaced by the assistant principal, who was new to administrative leadership.

This wave of turnover extended to other administrators the SAU office, high school, and other leadership roles throughout the district. Many of these departures were sudden and occurred mid-year and were attributed to “personal reasons,” though in some cases, it was implied that the resignations were not entirely voluntary. The cumulative effect was a growing perception of instability within district administration—an atmosphere that made it more difficult to build continuity, establish trust, or maintain confidence during an already sensitive period of planning and change.

Coerced Resignations & Administrative Retaliation

Despite denials that any of the resignations were involuntary, several high-profile incidents strongly suggested otherwise. In one widely discussed case, a heated exchange reportedly occurred between the superintendent and the food service director. According to certain accounts, the superintendent demanded the food service director’s resignation by morning—a request that was fulfilled.

As word of the superintendent’s demand for the food service director’s resignation spread, many in the community began connecting the dots. Rumors surrounding prior resignations were being reconsidered in light of this pattern, when it was officially announced that a popular band director had submitted his resignation “for personal reasons.” However, the following morning, the director issued a public statement correcting the record—asserting that he had not resigned and had no intention of doing so.

The controversy stemmed from the previous spring, when the director had taken home instruments and other equipment from the band room, including specialized air filters purchased to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Despite no evidence of theft or intent to misuse the items, the director was accused of stealing the filters and given an ultimatum: resign or “face legal consequences.” To the administration’s apparent surprise, he refused the ultimatum and chose to contest the accusation.

After nearly a year of investigation, the director was not charged, and the superintendent reinstated him. Yet within days, a regional news outlet published a press release stating that the State Department of Education had suspended the director—this time over a decades-old matter

in another school district. It was widely suspected that the referral came from the superintendent, prompting many to view the move as retaliatory. The timing and public nature of the press release only deepened concerns about administrative overreach and a lack of good faith in handling personnel matters.

Around the same time, the administration initiated a formal sexual harassment complaint against a sitting school board member following an awkward incident in which ostensibly mature audio was inadvertently played from the board member's phone just prior to a committee meeting. While the moment understandably caused discomfort, the ensuing process was widely criticized as disproportionate and politically motivated—particularly given a prior disagreement between the superintendent and the board member. Though ultimately exonerated, the board member's reputation suffered lasting damage, and his standing in the community was significantly undermined.

COVID-19 Reopening Plan

In the spring of 2022, this convergence of acute issues and longstanding challenges brought underlying frustrations with school management to the forefront. Contributing to the tension, Amherst and Souhegan—like many districts across the country—implemented remote learning options and mask mandates as part of their COVID-19 response plans. While these measures sparked significant backlash nationwide, Amherst navigated the controversy relatively smoothly. However, some local voters remained convinced that remote learning and mask mandates had caused psychological harm to children.

Ongoing Governance Challenges

Several recent actions have further eroded public trust in the district's decision-making process. Throughout the facilities planning effort, members of the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee (JFAC) and the Amherst School Board have repeatedly claimed that the Souhegan Board rejected the idea of using excess capacity on the high school campus. This claim is demonstrably false. The Souhegan Board has never formally deliberated on the proposal, nor has it taken a vote to reject it. In fact, the opposite is true: on at least two occasions, the Souhegan Board initiated outreach to the Amherst and Mont Vernon boards to assess their interest in exploring the concept.

In both instances, Souhegan conducted a preliminary review of its master schedule and confirmed that sufficient space potentially existed in the high school and Annex buildings. While perspectives varied among board members, no formal opposition was expressed, and no motion was made to reject the idea. Without a clear indication of interest from either partner district, Souhegan concluded that further analysis would be premature. The board ultimately voted to suspend consideration unless and until another board formally requested to revisit the proposal.

In the spring of 2024, just prior to the municipal elections, the chairs of the Amherst School Board and JFAC attended a Souhegan Cooperative Board meeting and spoke during public comment. During their remarks, they questioned the Souhegan Board chair about a decision—made the previous fall—to discontinue discussions about relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Annex. However, the decision to pause further exploration had actually come from the Amherst School Board. A selectively edited video clip circulated afterward reinforced the misperception that Souhegan had rejected the idea, further undermining confidence in the process.

Most recently, in the spring of 2025, the Amherst School Board accepted a substantial donation from an anonymous donor to fund a professionally produced video for "informational and marketing purposes." At least one board member cautioned that accepting anonymous funds and producing potentially persuasive materials so close to an election could violate state electioneering laws. These concerns were dismissed at the time. However, following legal review, it was determined that the video should not be released prior to the vote. Despite this, a former District Moderator submitted a right-to-know request and was given an unrestricted copy of the video, which was subsequently posted on social media. Because one of the administrators believed to have authorized the release was later revealed to be the anonymous donor, the circumstances surrounding its production and disclosure remain under review and may carry legal implications.

Silencing Dissent: A Missed Opportunity for Inclusive Dialogue

While all voices in the community should matter in a process as consequential as a major school construction project, many residents with legitimate concerns—spanning the political spectrum—have been systematically shut out of the conversation. A particularly telling example unfolded in 2023, when the Amherst Ways & Means Committee, whose members are appointed by the District Moderator to serve staggered three-year terms, took an uncharacteristically critical approach to evaluating the school district's budget and proposed capital projects, including the Wilkins rebuild.

Composed of members with diverse political viewpoints, the committee undertook a deep dive into the district's financial and academic performance—seeking to understand whether investments in programming and staffing were producing measurable educational improvements. Their analysis followed a performance-based budgeting approach commonly used in other school districts, which links resource allocation to outcomes. This method highlighted areas of concern, particularly around declining school performance despite rising expenditures. Although the committee's votes on various spending articles were mixed, a majority ultimately voted against the Wilkins proposal—marking a stark departure from the committee's historically consistent support for school initiatives.

The response was swift and pointed. Rather than engaging with the substance of the committee's findings, several project supporters sought to discredit its members—accusing them of partisanship, obstructionism, or overstepping their advisory role. In doing so, they deflected attention from the committee's underlying message: that rising costs were not being matched by measurable academic gains. That spring, a former school board member ran for District Moderator on a platform that explicitly called for replacing the Ways & Means Committee with members more closely aligned with the district's goals. After winning the election, she dismissed the remaining committee members who had not already resigned and appointed a new slate widely seen as a "rubber stamp" committee.

This episode reflects a broader pattern explored later in the *Illusion of Consensus* section: rather than fully engaging with dissenting perspectives, the district and its supporters have at times relied on their electoral advantage to shape the composition of decision-making bodies. While this strategy ensures alignment, it also foregoes the opportunity to incorporate alternative voices that could help build the broader consensus needed to secure a 60% supermajority. In narrowing

the conversation to those already in agreement, they may unintentionally limit the project's appeal and hinder the trust-building necessary for long-term success.

Dismissal of dissent does not eliminate disagreement—it simply drives it underground, where it continues to grow. Over time, even well-intentioned leadership can fall prey to a form of groupthink: reinforcing internal consensus while failing to meaningfully engage external voices. The result is a flawed decision-making culture that prioritizes unity over reflection and prematurely closes off debate.

Rebuilding trust will require more than better messaging or refined planning. It will demand a cultural shift in how district leadership approaches transparency, accountability, and public engagement. Without that shift, any future proposal—no matter how technically sound—risks the same fate as its predecessors.

HISTORY

Behind the Space Constraints

The need for updated elementary school facilities in Amherst extends beyond the age and physical condition of the buildings. While there is no question that both schools are aging—the Clark School was built in 1937 and the Wilkins School in 1968—the challenge is more complex than simple wear and tear. In a town where many buildings date back to colonial times, these schools are relatively young by comparison. However, despite periodic repairs and additions, both facilities are fundamentally products of another era and fall short of modern educational design standards.

What is less obvious to many residents is how the buildings became overutilized despite years of stagnant—or even declining—enrollment. For decades, four of the six fourth-grade classrooms have been housed in portable trailers behind the school. Yet during that same period, overall enrollment in the district fell considerably. The disconnect between declining student numbers and increasing space pressure has several underlying causes. Key contributing factors include:

Portable Classrooms

As Amherst's population grew rapidly throughout the 1990s, space constraints became a serious challenge. To address the issue, most of the town's schools relied heavily on portable classrooms—mobile trailers configured with two classrooms each. At one point, there were as many as eight portable classrooms at the high school, 12 at the middle school—which consumed all of the school's playground space—and at least four at Clark-Wilkins, two of which remain in use today. Most of the trailers were removed following an addition to the middle school and the construction of the Annex at the high school and currently only the two fourth-grade trailers remain at the Wilkins School. While enrollment was significantly higher at the time, the overflow was managed through portable classrooms rather than within the core facilities.

Pre-K – Kindergarten

In the late 1990s, Amherst School District added a kindergarten program, adding about 100 students. For the first year, about half of the new kindergarteners were housed in the "Brick School," which was originally built in 1854. After a small addition at Wilkins and renovations at Clark in 1998-99, all students were moved into the main buildings. New Hampshire's requirement for public school districts to offer at least part-time kindergarten has contributed to

increased enrollment and added pressure on overall capacity. Amherst's transition to a full-day kindergarten program effectively doubled the number of classrooms needed, placing significant additional strain on available space. The decision to relocate the Pre-K program to Clark-Wilkins further reduced the flexibility of existing facilities. Previously operated by Sunrise Children's Center, part of The Regional Services and Education Center (RSEC), the preschool program was moved to Clark-Wilkins in 2011.

In-Districting of Special Education Programs

A core principle of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the requirement to provide services in the least restrictive environment (LRE), meaning students with disabilities should be educated alongside their non-disabled peers whenever appropriate. As part of this effort, the district has worked to expand services and transition students from out-of-district placements back into the district—a process known as in-districting. While space constraints were not an immediate concern when these changes were implemented, they gradually increased the district's need for specialized classrooms and support spaces over time.

"The Covid Boom"

While many observers predicted a "COVID baby boom," the anticipated surge in births never truly materialized. Although Amherst and other parts of Southern New Hampshire did see a temporary increase in births, that uptick began in 2019—prior to the COVID lockdowns—and more closely aligned with a surge in home sales, which may have been indirectly influenced by the pandemic. A short-term wave of migration, fueled by low interest rates and a shift from urban to rural living, contributed to localized increases in both births and school enrollment, creating the illusion of long-term growth. However, more recent data suggests this trend is reversing, casting doubt on the lasting impact of these pandemic-era shifts. These fluctuations highlight the need for thoughtful planning and a more nuanced understanding of enrollment dynamics—issues that will be explored further in subsequent sections.

RECONFIGURATION EFFORTS

Streamline Committee

Prior to launching the most recent effort to update or replace the elementary school buildings, district leaders wisely recognized the importance of first examining the broader structural context in which such a project would take place. In November 2015, a "Streamline Committee" was formed to explore whether the complex governance structure across the Amherst, Mont Vernon, and Souhegan school districts could be made more efficient. The following year, in October 2016, the committee issued its final report, recommending the formation of a follow-up committee to more deeply explore the possibility of consolidating the three districts into a single, unified governance model. This forward-thinking approach acknowledged that any significant capital investment—such as constructing new facilities—would likely lock in the existing structure for decades to come. By examining governance first, the district took an important step toward ensuring that future decisions would align with long-term operational and educational goals.

Notably, the Streamline Committee also produced a long-range enrollment forecast that diverged sharply from official projections at the time. While the district's formal forecasts anticipated stable or growing enrollment at Souhegan High School, the committee projected a decline—predicting enrollment would fall below 700 students by the early 2020s. That projection turned

out to be far more accurate, highlighting the committee's analytical rigor and underscoring the value of independent, systems-level thinking in long-term planning.

Reconfiguration Committee

Subsequently, the SAU 39 Reconfiguration Committee was tasked with evaluating potential governance changes across the three districts—Amherst School District (ASD), Mont Vernon School District (MVSD), and the Souhegan Cooperative School Board (SCSB). The committee explored options such as full Pre-K–12 consolidation, partial consolidation for grades 5–12, and maintaining the current structure with improved collaboration. Importantly, in this context, "reconfiguration" referred exclusively to governance structure—that is, which grade levels would fall under the jurisdiction of each district—not to the physical relocation of students or reassignment of school buildings. At the time, a 7–12 configuration was not considered, as no proposals had yet been introduced to relocate Grades 7 and 8 to the high school campus, and existing building use patterns did not support that alignment.

While the committee's primary focus remained on governance, members acknowledged that structural changes would likely prompt a future reconfiguration of grade-level assignments. Their analysis highlighted the logistical, financial, and political complexities of unifying governance—particularly the challenges posed by multiple collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), differing tax bases, and the need to ensure equitable representation across communities.

Although the committee deferred a detailed examination of building use or grade placement, they recognized that a streamlined governance model could offer greater flexibility in resource sharing, programmatic access, and educational equity. Ultimately, they viewed governance restructuring as a prerequisite for addressing broader operational and academic issues across SAU 39.

Labor and Legal Analysis

Expert legal counsel was engaged to outline the potential legal and contractual challenges of reconfiguration, including the risks of forced reductions in force, new union formations, and the renegotiation of agreements. The impact of transitioning employees across different CBAs was a recurring concern, with predictions of increased costs and administrative complexity.

The committee went so far as to have the district's legal team draft a memo outlining how, under the proposed reconfiguration, Amherst Middle School would be dissolved and its staff transitioned to the Souhegan Cooperative School District through a reduction-in-force and rehire process. While this would remove employees from Amherst's current collective bargaining agreements, they would retain the right to reorganize under the Co-op through the PELRB. The plan was designed to respect union protections while enabling structural changes that promote long-term equity, operational efficiency, and broad community benefit.

While maintaining a constructive partnership with the unions remains important, the priorities of any such reconfiguration must ultimately center on what is best for students, educational governance, and the community.

Educational Benefits and Operational Efficiency

Discussions revolved around increasing flexibility in staffing, enhancing curricular opportunities, and leveraging shared resources, such as allowing middle school students to access high school

courses. The committee aimed to align their recommendations with broader SAU goals, including fostering equity of experience for students and staff, as well as addressing demographic shifts and enrollment trends.

Community and Political Considerations
The committee identified the importance of securing community buy-in, emphasizing the need for transparent communication and clear articulation of educational and financial benefits. Recommendations included strategies to minimize resistance, such as preserving local control over elementary schools and structuring voting processes to reflect these priorities.

Committee's Conclusion
After extensive discussions and analysis, the committee concluded that:

A full Pre-K-12 consolidation, while ideal in theory for maximizing flexibility and resource alignment, was deemed politically untenable at that time.

The 5-12 configuration emerged as a more practical intermediate step, though it posed challenges related to union negotiations and governance.

Ultimately, the committee deferred action on the proposal to consolidate the districts and instead recommended focusing on improving operational alignment across the existing districts. While full reconfiguration was set aside, the goal was to lay the groundwork for potential consolidation in the future.

Seventh and Eighth Grades into the Cooperative
Despite a diligent and comprehensive review of multiple grade configurations, one of the most logical options was never explored. Mont Vernon educates its students locally through sixth grade, then tuitions seventh and eighth graders to Amherst Middle School, before both towns participate in the Souhegan Cooperative School District for high school. At the time of the committee's work, enrollment at Souhegan High School was significantly higher. And although overall numbers had been steadily declining for years, administrative forecasts continued to project growth. In contrast, the 2015–16 Streamline Committee accurately anticipated long-term enrollment decline across the region. These competing narratives likely contributed to the perception that utilizing space at Souhegan for grades seven and eight was not a viable or necessary option at the time.

As a result, the concept of housing seventh and eighth grades on the Souhegan campus—while maintaining them as a separate middle or junior high school under Souhegan governance—was never proposed and therefore not considered by the committee. Revisiting this option today could offer a number of benefits: streamlining governance, improving continuity for Mont Vernon students, optimizing underutilized facilities, and strengthening cross-district collaboration. Given the district's existing cooperative framework and the shifting educational landscape, this approach warrants renewed consideration as part of any long-term strategic plan.

JOINT FACILITIES ADVISORY COMMITTEE (JFAC)

Following the conclusion of the reconfiguration committee's work, a new committee called the—Joint Facilities Committee (later changed to Joint Facilities Advisory Committee, or JFAC,

pronounced “J-FAC”)—was formed to explore the need for updated space at the lower elementary level, specifically Clark-Wilkins.

Inception

The need for a new elementary school has been on the community’s priority list for a long time. The last significant effort to build a new school occurred in the early 2000s, when the Amherst School District purchased land on Baboosic Lake Road (see Birch Park). However, that effort ultimately failed to produce a viable project, and no construction ever took place. In the years since, while discussions have persisted, substantial progress stalled—leaving the district to rely on temporary fixes rather than long-term solutions. An addition to the middle school during that same period helped reduce the need for portable classrooms, alleviating some immediate space pressures but not addressing broader facility limitations. It is no surprise, then, that after nearly two decades, the district would make another attempt to resolve the issue in a more comprehensive and permanent way.

In 2018, the SAU Board, comprising all members of the three school district boards, approved the creation of a Joint Facilities Committee (JFC). The first meeting of the JFC, which later became the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee (JFAC), was held on October 22, 2018. Although no minutes were produced, the attendee list reflected a broad spectrum of representation, including school administrators, school board members, at least one high school student, and members of the community. The agenda was equally expansive, aligning with the committee’s task of reviewing school facilities systemwide. It addressed topics such as the information to be collected, how the plan would be communicated and marketed, and the process for developing the eventual warrant article.

As discussions progressed, three distinct projects began to take shape. The first was a renovation and expansion of the Wilkins Elementary School, which would relocate pre-K and kindergarten from the Clark School and fifth grade from the middle school. The third project—originally identified as the top priority—was the Souhegan 2.0 initiative, based on a conceptual plan developed by the architectural firm Lavallee Brensinger. This proposal was prompted in part by a note in Souhegan’s NEASC accreditation report, which raised concerns about the size of the science classrooms in the Annex. Because these rooms were classified as laboratories, they were deemed undersized according to current standards. While there was no indication that Souhegan’s accreditation was in jeopardy, the report recommended a review of how the physical configuration of the rooms aligned with the school’s science program. In addition to the science labs, several other needs were identified as high priorities, including repairs to the locker rooms, security upgrades, and the replacement of the aging HVAC system in the Annex.

Timeline

On December 3, 2018, the JFAC was introduced at a joint meeting of the Amherst and Souhegan Cooperative School Boards. Again, there were no minutes produced. However, the slide presentation that was delivered is included in the minutes, including a proposal for a warrant article requesting $225,000 for professional services related to developing a plan for Amherst facilities.

The December 3 meeting marked the last published gathering of the JFAC until December 5, 2019. Subsequent discussions centered on bond issuance processes, the financial impact of large bonds, capital needs assessments, and strategies to communicate project necessity to voters.

While Slack was used for information sharing, this content was not documented in the minutes. Marketing strategies, including “tag lines,” were also discussed.

On January 8, 2019, the Amherst School Board (ASB) unanimously approved placing a $225,000 warrant article for professional services to develop a long-range facilities plan on the ballot. However, voters rejected the article. By 2020, the amount was reduced to $150,000 and incorporated into the ASD budget.

Architect Lance Whitehead of Lavallee Brensinger introduced a planning process on April 16, 2020, which included a staff survey. Mr. Whitehead was an integral part of the planning process from this point forward, until the architecture firm Lavallee Brensinger was replaced by Banwell in 2021.

JFAC did extensive work on developing long-term capital needs assessments and was in possession of the Souhegan 2.0 document, which outlined the capital maintenance needs of Souhegan High School, which included replacement of the HVAC system and reconfiguration of some of the science rooms in the Annex. Also included in Souhegan 2.0 was a series of projects intended to refresh and update the facilities and take advantage of open spaces that became available due to declining enrollment.

On May 21, 2020, Mr. Whitehead returned to discuss the results of the staff survey. The May 21 and June 18 meetings focused on prospective areas for renovation or construction, including flex spaces, outdoor classrooms, redesigned playgrounds, and recreation space for the general community. Middle school needs and projects proposed in the Souhegan 2.0 report were also discussed.

On July 23, 2020, Mr. Whitehead reviewed the results of the community survey. Seventy-six percent of the respondents were parents with children currently in the school system.

The scope of the proposed project included demolishing the existing Wilkins building to make room for the Pre-K and kindergarten programs currently housed at the Clark School, as well as the fifth grade, which would be relocated from the middle school. The proposed new facility featured two full-sized gymnasiums, collaborative learning spaces, outdoor classrooms, and multiple age-appropriate playgrounds. In addition, the bond included funds for renovations to the middle school, bringing the total initial proposal to $98 million. After presenting the project to the public, district officials opted to delay placing the bond on the ballot due to a perceived lack of community support. Subsequently, the decision was made to change architects and develop an alternative plan that would reduce both the scope and cost of the project. The following year, a scaled-back version of the proposal—totaling $83 million—was placed on the ballot.

At the time, the Souhegan 2.0 project was still under consideration with an estimated cost of approximately $30 million. Taken together with the proposed reconstruction of the Wilkins School and planned updates to the Amherst Middle School, the district was effectively scheduling three major capital projects in quick succession—totaling over $110 million.

Concerns about this sequencing were raised during the October 21, 2020 meeting. One of the primary drivers behind the Souhegan 2.0 proposal was the need to replace the aging HVAC

system in the Annex. However, that project was ultimately deferred in favor of the Wilkins and AMS initiatives. When asked whether the HVAC system could remain viable until a later date, Facilities Director Mr. Preston stated that, with short-term repairs, "they are confident that the unit ventilators will last five years." Superintendent Steel added that "they say 5–10 years because it depends on how quickly valuation grows. It is reasonable to assume that if they build a new elementary and middle school that their property values will increase more quickly than they anticipate. That will result in more quickly being able to afford a third project. They can say a range with 10 and as possibly as early as 5 years."

This exchange provides insight into the underlying logic used to justify the rapid timeline: namely, that new school construction would accelerate property value growth, thereby enabling the town to afford additional projects sooner. However, this rationale appears to conflate debt capacity with tax tolerance—two concepts that, while related, are not synonymous. Rising property valuations may technically expand the town's ability to take on debt without exceeding recommended ratios, but that does not guarantee community support or the financial ability of residents to shoulder increased tax burdens.

Critically, valuation growth does not always track with household income, particularly for retirees and residents on fixed incomes. Higher assessments may simply translate into higher tax bills—without the means to pay them. Assuming that property value appreciation will generate political support for consecutive multimillion-dollar projects overlooks the nuanced economic, demographic, and psychological dynamics of municipal finance. It may be a legally viable strategy, but one that is practically and politically precarious.

Annex Consideration

The committee's decision-making regarding the potential use of surplus space at the high school campus, specifically the Annex building, has drawn recent skepticism from some community members. At the time JFAC was formed during the 2018-2019 school year, there were 740 students enrolled in Souhegan High School, with official forecasts indicating increasing enrollment. Over time, however, enrollment continued to decline and is currently at about 700 students.

The Annex was briefly discussed during a May 21, 2020, Zoom meeting, but it was never seriously considered as part of a broader conversation on the scope of work or possible realignment options to reduce the scale of the Wilkins project. Instead, the discussion focused primarily on *Souhegan 2.0*, a conceptual plan by the architectural firm Lavallee Brensinger, which proposed a major redesign and renovation of the Souhegan campus.

Architect Lance Whitehead, who participated in the discussion, noted that the Souhegan 2.0 plan—which aimed to repurpose underutilized space on the high school campus—was developed primarily in response to enrollment levels at the time. This presents a curious contrast, as enrollment projections were simultaneously being used to justify a large-scale reconstruction of the elementary school based on anticipated growth. It raises questions about the consistency of assumptions driving major capital decisions. During the same meeting, it was generally agreed that the Souhegan campus was operating at no more than 70–75% of its capacity. Superintendent Adam Steel supported this view, stating, "I would say that the Souhegan campus has headroom

in terms of capacity—we had over a thousand students there not that long ago… I'm not worried about capacity."

Mr. Steel added, "Well, I'd be remiss if I didn't say we've been having conversations over the last several years about whether the Annex is used or repurposed for other things, right? I don't want to lose that in the conversation. And it's very complicated. There are many complications. But things people have thought about: the eighth grade, the fourth grade, special education programming, kindergarten, preschool—all sorts of other things being used as a way to be more efficient with our resources. So that shouldn't be lost in this conversation either."

It was clarified during the meeting that the proposed science lab renovations were for the Annex, and Mr. Steel confirmed this. However, as enrollment has declined further since May 2020, the scope of those renovations has shifted. Current planning includes the possibility of consolidating all science classrooms into the main building, rather than upgrading labs in the Annex.

There was also concern about the potential financial inefficiency of investing in short-term renovations. Mr. Steel commented, "…the potential to lose—or to have spent money on—science lab renovations that are only used for three school years is not the greatest use of tax dollars, but it's not the worst either."

Ms. Gascoyne noted that previous discussions had identified "significant challenges with bringing any lower grades into that building." Superintendent Steel acknowledged this, reiterating that alternative uses for the Annex had included kindergarten, preschool, and special education—though such programs would likely be restricted to the first floor. There was also discussion about the potential need to expand special education space more broadly.

At one point, it was asked whether the decision to consider the Annex fell under the purview of the JFAC or whether it should be deferred to the Souhegan Board. Mr. Steel responded that he believed it was JFAC's responsibility to make that determination, stating, "The voters will let us know when they vote for the plan, and they'll have opportunities for feedback before that, obviously, as well."

He added that the administration had discussed the matter extensively, and the only use they were truly interested in for the Annex was special services—as long as the district could tuition students in from other school districts and generate revenue. The conversation then centered on special education, with Mr. Steel noting that they were exploring whether the Annex could house special services programming for grades 5 through 12, which he indicated would be a more efficient delivery model.

Near the end of the discussion, Souhegan Board member Stephanie Grund expressed a desire to retain the Annex to ensure that high school students retain access to a broad selection of classes. She was concerned that losing space would also restrict programming. It was stated again by Superintendent Steel that the campus has significant excess capacity, so programming was not at risk. Pim Grondstra, the other Souhegan Board member on the committee, referred to uncertainty regarding enrollment forecasts, but expressed support for the Souhegan 2.0 plan, which seemed to allow for conversion of areas affected by the renovation back to classroom space if enrollment

did increase in the future. At this point in the meeting, Ms. Gascoyne, chair of the committee, paused the discussion and said,

"For the purposes of kinda moving forward—and we had the discussion about the Annex—as a group then… do we all support [architects] Lance and Anne (Ketterer) moving forward *not* considering the Annex as a space for our middle school grades or our elementary school grades? Is that the feeling of the group?"

She raised her hand and scanned the screen to assess visual responses from the committee. She then asked John Bowkett if he had any thoughts.

Mr. Bowkett responded:

"Well, we, as a committee, we've been designated to do certain criterias, and I think this is one of them. So, it just needs to be on the table and then you let the board decide which way to go. But you still make a recommendation as to which way you feel this committee recommends. So it's either-or the way you present it, but you should still cover all the aspects that you're talking about."

Ms. Gascoyne then returned to the screen and summarized:

"Right. I think then we've arrived at—we've discussed the Annex, and our recommendation at this time is for Lavallee Brensinger to move forward with the study in the Amherst School District and *not* consider the Annex as an option for any of the grades at those schools. Is that…?"

Shortly after this exchange, the meeting wrapped up.

While this discussion is present in the video recording of the meeting, it was omitted from the written minutes. Critics have since pointed out that the decision to exclude the Annex was made without input from the full Souhegan Board and was never included in a formal cost-benefit analysis. Some argue that this omission should have been addressed to ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of all viable space options.

Although the committee's actions may have reflected a good-faith effort to manage competing priorities—and the simultaneous consideration of plans for Wilkins, AMS, and Souhegan 2.0 suggested a degree of comprehensive, system-wide thinking—the process has nevertheless drawn scrutiny. Specifically, the perceived lack of broader consultation has raised legitimate questions about whether the district fully explored all viable opportunities to optimize existing space. This moment reflects a broader pattern described later in the report as an *illusion of consensus*: well-intentioned groups, operating without expressed procedural guardrails or clear community validation, may inadvertently reinforce a singular narrative while sidelining reasonable alternatives. Without inclusive engagement and transparent evaluation, decisions can appear settled when, in reality, the public conversation has yet to meaningfully begin.

The Illusion of Consensus: Process Without Representation

A big part of rebuilding trust is showing the community that their voices matter—and that begins by engaging more than just the most vocal or readily available participants. Broad support cannot be expected without a genuine, sustained effort to involve the wider public in the process. Empowering community volunteers through planning committees is a valid way to foster engagement, but without clear guardrails—such as sound methodology, safeguards against project creep, and mechanisms for objective problem-solving—even well-intentioned efforts can gradually expand into projects of unintended scale or complexity. Volunteer committees like JFAC can be valuable, but they require structure, oversight, and periodic recalibration to stay aligned with broader community priorities.

Several factors likely contributed to the erosion of those safeguards. When the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee began its work, the leadership team—including the superintendent and many building administrators—was relatively new and lacked experience not only in running Amherst's schools, but in managing a large-scale, publicly funded construction initiative. The committee also operated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when communication was fragmented and meaningful public engagement was especially difficult.

These challenges were compounded by leadership turnover. The project spanned three different superintendents: it was launched under one, carried forward during an interim term, and ultimately handed off to a third. By the time the current superintendent assumed the role, reestablishing oversight would have proved difficult. Some committee members had been involved for up to five years, and the project had gained momentum around a particular vision. At that stage, adjusting course or reopening foundational questions became politically and practically challenging, even as public support remained elusive.

Much of the outreach relied on voluntary, opt-in surveys that were neither scientific nor proactively distributed—tools that often fail to capture the full range of community concerns. One survey conducted by the architectural firm showed that 76% of respondents were parents of children currently enrolled in the schools. Another, focused on the future of the Clark School, received only 172 responses. While 211 individuals submitted open-ended feedback, this cannot reasonably be interpreted as broad community consensus. In a town of more than 12,000 residents, such a limited response rate underscores the need for more rigorous public engagement strategies.

Although some of these efforts occurred during or shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic—when participation was shaped by health concerns and economic stressors—those limitations no longer explain the district's continued struggle to engage a broader cross-section of the public.

As illustrated earlier by the dismissal of the Ways & Means Committee, the district's difficulty in sustaining broad community dialogue may reflect deeper cultural challenges rather than isolated missteps. Rather than restarting the process entirely, the district has an opportunity to revisit and refine its approach by drawing on the extensive data, community feedback, and reports already available. Updating key assumptions and incorporating a wider range of perspectives into the next phase of planning can help align the project more closely with current realities—positioning it for broader support and long-term success.

Conclusion of JFAC
Following its initial defeat at the polls in 2022 with only 38% of the vote, the construction bond was scaled back to $54 million, excluding middle school renovations, and placed on the ballot in 2023. However, it received less than 44% of the vote. In response, the Amherst School Board and the Joint Facilities Advisory Committee (JFAC) sought and secured approval from the Board of Selectmen to use impact fee funds to further revise and scale back the scope of the project.

The proposal presented to voters in 2024 retained the Clark School for Pre-K and Kindergarten, with the only grade-level reconfiguration being the relocation of 5th grade from the middle school. The revised plan totaled just under $50 million. Despite the reductions, the measure was again defeated, receiving only 54% of the 60% required for approval.

At this point, JFAC disbanded, with its responsibilities transitioning to the Amherst School District's Buildings and Grounds Committee, ending the collaboration between the districts.

In March of 2025, the same project was again placed on the ballot and was defeated a fourth time, still only achieving about 54%.

Amherst Buildings and Grounds
In the wake of the project's repeated defeats, the Amherst School District has chosen to rely solely on its intradistrict Buildings and Grounds Committee to advance the proposal. This shift has raised concerns among some in the community, who worry that the district is isolating itself from the broader collaborative framework that once connected it to the larger educational system. Critics argue that this inward focus has created an increasingly insular decision-making process. Rather than engaging a diverse cross-section of stakeholders, the committee appears to favor participants already aligned with the original project vision. This risks creating an echo chamber in which dissenting views are excluded and affirming perspectives are amplified. In doing so, the district may be unintentionally eroding the public trust and broad-based support it needs to successfully move forward with any major capital initiative. Without actively welcoming external perspectives and revisiting foundational assumptions, the process risks continuing to stall—repeating old missteps under the illusion of consensus.

MONT VERNON'S RESPONSE

Mont Vernon faces a uniquely challenging financial landscape that significantly influences its relationship with both the Amherst and Souhegan school districts. As a small town of 2,661 residents as of 2023 with minimal commercial tax base, Mont Vernon consistently ranks among the New Hampshire communities with the highest property tax rates. This leaves residents especially sensitive to rising school costs, even when they support the educational mission. Despite a long-standing and generally positive relationship with Souhegan High School, the Mont Vernon community has voted against the Souhegan budget in each of the last two years—a possible indicator of mounting fiscal strain rather than a lack of support for the school itself. These dynamics have created pressure on the town's tuition agreement with the Amherst School District for middle school students and could lead Mont Vernon to reevaluate its long-term educational arrangements if cost concerns continue to escalate.

Amid these district-wide facilities discussions, Mont Vernon's separate contractual relationship with Amherst added another layer of complexity to the planning process. Currently, the Mont Vernon School District (MVSD) has a tuition agreement with the Amherst School District to educate Mont Vernon's seventh and eighth graders at Amherst Middle School (AMS). The tuition calculation in the agreement states:

"The intent of the parties is that the tuition charged to the Mont Vernon School District by the Amherst School District for the current school year shall be determined based on the average of the Amherst Middle School New Hampshire Department of Education (DOE-25) calculation of cost per pupil ('CPP') for the two previous school years, multiplied by the current school year's October 1st enrollment at Amherst Middle School, but not to exceed an increase of 5.6% of the cost per pupil average for the prior two school years."

Additionally, the agreement includes a clause holding MVSD responsible for a share of any long-term debt obligations, based on enrollment. As a result, MVSD became concerned that with 5th grade moving to the proposed rebuilt Wilkins School, both the cost per pupil and the debt obligation could become cost prohibitive.

Options Condsidered

In response to Amherst's proposed reorganization and construction projects along with the associated capital costs, Mont Vernon formed a study committee in September 2021 to evaluate middle school options for its seventh and eighth grade students. On February 9, 2022, the committee presented its report, outlining a range of alternatives, each with financial and logistical implications, particularly regarding the cost-sharing obligations tied to Amherst Middle School (AMS). The options considered included:

Maintaining the Current Tuition Agreement: Continuing to tuition seventh and eighth graders to AMS, preserving access to its programs and facilities while sharing in its operational and capital costs.

Developing a K-8 Program in Mont Vernon: Expanding the Mont Vernon Village School (MVVS) to include seventh- and eighth-grade classrooms, requiring additional space, staff, and resources.

Leasing or Utilizing Alternative Space: Establishing a separate middle school program in a leased facility or shared space, such as the Souhegan Annex.

Tuitioning Students to Other Schools: Exploring agreements with alternative public or private schools to educate Mont Vernon's seventh- and eighth-grade students.

Exploring Cooperative Models: Revisiting the possibility of forming a cooperative middle school program with Amherst, though acknowledging the legal and logistical challenges of past attempts.

On January 5, 2023, the Mont Vernon School Board discussed a warrant article to request $60,000 for an Architectural and Engineering (A&E) study focused on potential renovations and additions to the Mont Vernon Village School (MVVS). The proposed study would include a

conceptual design, program study, cost estimate, and site review, addressing the district's long-term space and facility needs. This funding request would come from the district's unassigned fund balance, ensuring no new taxation.

During the discussion, board members emphasized the importance of explaining the study's scope and purpose to the community, particularly in the context of projected enrollment and the need for flexibility in planning. The motion to approve the warrant article was passed unanimously, reflecting the board's commitment to exploring practical solutions for Mont Vernon's educational infrastructure.

On March 14, 2023, the Town of Mont Vernon approved the $60,000 request by a vote of 327 to 242. Harriman Architecture was subsequently hired to conduct the A&E work.

On November 7, 2024, the Mont Vernon School Board reviewed the ongoing work regarding Harriman Architecture. It was decided to table further discussion on the topic until after the 2025 election in March.

SCHOOLS

MONT VERNON VILLAGE SCHOOL

The Mont Vernon Village School is a small public school serving students in kindergarten through sixth grade. It is the only school operated by the Mont Vernon School District (MVSD) and is part of School Administrative Unit 39 (SAU). The school typically enrolls between 150 and 200 students and supports multi-grade programming in some years depending on enrollment. After sixth grade, students attend Amherst Middle School through a longstanding tuition agreement with the Amherst School District and then continue on to Souhegan High School as full members of the Souhegan Cooperative School District. The MVSD is currently evaluating the possibility of expanding the Village School to accommodate seventh and eighth grades on site.

On a historical note: prior to the construction of the Village School, the historic McCollom Building—originally built in 1853 and now home to the town clerk's office and Mont Vernon Police Department—served as the primary educational facility for grades 1 through 6. The building was deeded to the Mont Vernon School District in 1947 and continued to house students until the opening of Mont Vernon Village School in 1971. Initially, only grades 4 through 6 moved to the new facility, while younger students remained in the McCollom Building until the Village School was expanded in 1990 to accommodate all grades. Since that time, the McCollom Building has served exclusively as a municipal facility..

CLARK-WILKINS SCHOOL

Clark-Wilkins Elementary School in Amherst, New Hampshire, serves the town's pre-kindergarten through fourth-grade students across two interconnected campuses: Clark School and Wilkins School. Together, they form the backbone of Amherst's early education system, fostering academic, social, and emotional development during the most formative years of a child's schooling.

Clark School, built in 1937, is a 27,000-square-foot facility dedicated to pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students. It contains approximately nine general-purpose classrooms and features an all-purpose room used for gym, assemblies, and other activities. However, it lacks a full-service kitchen. As a result, lunches are prepared at the nearby Wilkins School and transported daily by staff. Despite these limitations, Clark emphasizes a nurturing and supportive learning environment tailored to early learners' needs.

Wilkins School, constructed in 1968, accommodates students in grades one through four. The building spans approximately 55,000 square feet and contains at least 25 general-purpose classrooms—four of which are housed in portable classrooms behind the main building. In addition to a full-service kitchen and a dedicated library, the school features a central gathering space that can be called a "cafegymatorium," a multipurpose room that serves as the cafeteria, gymnasium, and auditorium, complete with a stage. While this shared-use model maximizes space, it also imposes significant limitations on scheduling and programming. Like its counterpart at the Clark campus, Wilkins has endured decades of continuous use and now falls

short of modern educational and building standards, particularly in areas such as accessibility, energy efficiency, and instructional flexibility.

Both buildings also house various support services including special education, speech and occupational therapy, counseling, and reading interventions. Staff and parent volunteers play an active role in enhancing the learning environment, helping to bridge the gap between limited space and growing programmatic needs.

Still, infrastructure constraints present significant challenges. Many classrooms lack basic features such as sinks, and the mechanical systems are outdated. Air quality, ADA accessibility, and energy inefficiency are persistent concerns. As enrollment needs shift and educational standards evolve, the limitations of Clark and Wilkins underscore the urgent need for updated, flexible, and accessible learning environments that reflect today's expectations for public education.

AMHERST MIDDLE SCHOOL

Amherst Middle School, located at 14 Cross Road in Amherst, New Hampshire, is a 112,000-square-foot facility that serves approximately 638 students in grades five through eight, as of October 2024. One report states that the capacity of the school is 735. However, this number likely included the *Innovation & Design* rooms, now home to the Maker Space, as well as rooms that have been repurposed to accommodate special services. The building is organized into two divisions—a lower school for grades 5–6 and an upper school for grades 7–8. Inside, the school offers a range of academic and program-specific spaces, including general-purpose classrooms, science labs, art and music rooms, a library/media center, a full-size gym, and a cafeteria. Classrooms are grouped into team-based clusters that support interdisciplinary instruction and help foster a smaller, more connected learning environment.

Amherst Middle School is located near Souhegan High School, and the two buildings share a bus loop and some site infrastructure. However, they are not physically connected, and the walk between the buildings is substantial enough that they operate independently in both practice and programming. The building was originally designed to accommodate a comprehensive middle school model but offers some flexibility for evolving educational needs.

SOUHEGAN HIGH SCHOOL

Separation from MASH

Souhegan High School was established in 1992 as a progressive and innovative educational institution serving students from Amherst and Mont Vernon. Its creation was driven by the desire for greater local control and educational alignment after years of sending students to Milford Area Senior High School under a regional enrollment agreement established in 1964. In 1988, voters in Amherst and Mont Vernon approved the formation of the Souhegan Cooperative School District, paving the way for Souhegan's development.

The school was deeply influenced by the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), a reform movement led by Theodore R. Sizer. Souhegan adopted the CES philosophy of student-centered learning, depth over breadth in curriculum, and fostering a strong sense of community.

The school's mission, "Souhegan High School aspires to be a community of learners born of respect, trust, and courage," reflects its commitment to creating a supportive yet challenging educational environment.

Early Years and Impact on the Community
From its inception, Souhegan High School became a point of pride for the community, attracting families who valued its innovative approach. Surveys from the 1990s indicate that as many as 80% of families who moved to Amherst cited Souhegan High School as a key reason for their decision (Richard Lalley. The Enrollment & School Capacity Report: Amherst, Mont Vernon, Souhegan. January 1996). The school's focus on balancing academic rigor with social-emotional development through its motto, "Standards of Mind and Heart," resonated with families seeking a well-rounded education for their children.

Souhegan's unique features, including its advisory program, performance-based assessments, interdisciplinary learning, and Senior Projects, set it apart from traditional high schools. The school emphasized collaboration, critical thinking, and the development of ethical and empathetic citizens.

Growth and Expansion
The school's popularity and growing enrollment led to the construction of the Souhegan Annex in 2003 to address space constraints. The Annex provided additional classrooms and facilities to support the expanding student body and programmatic needs.

Academic and Cultural Legacy
Souhegan High School has consistently been recognized for its academic excellence and innovative practices. In 2009, it was ranked 15th in *Newsweek*'s "Top of the Class" list of top public high schools in the United States. The school has been an active participant in initiatives like the Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE), reflecting its commitment to deeper learning and competency-based education.

The high school continues to be a central feature of the Amherst and Mont Vernon communities, fostering a culture of mutual respect, trust, and high standards. Its guiding philosophy of "Standards of Mind and Heart" remains a cornerstone of its approach to education, balancing intellectual growth with social and emotional development.

Annex
The Annex is a subsidiary building located on the campus of Souhegan High School. In 1992, the main building opened with 705 students enrolled, exceeding its designed capacity of 700 students at 80% utilization (see Richard Lalley). By the 1995–96 school year, enrollment had grown to 760 students and was projected to exceed 800 by 1996–97, with continued growth anticipated. By the 2005–06 school year, enrollment had reached 1,046 students.

To accommodate the increasing enrollment, the school initially installed temporary portable classrooms. In 2002, Harvey Construction received approval to build a 40,000-square-foot standalone building, designed by Lavallee Brensinger Architects, with 24 classrooms adjacent to the main building.

Layout
The Annex consist of 24 classrooms of various sizes along straight corridors on two floors. The first floor includes a set of offices, a teacher work area, a cafeteria, and student lockers located in the corridor. The second-floor features floor two seminar rooms, equivalent in size to large conference rooms, along with additional lockers along the corridor.

Current use
Since 2005-06, enrollment at Souhegan has gradually declined, reaching 680 students in the 2023-24 school year before rebounding slightly to 700 currently. As enrollment decreased, most areas in the Annex remained as originally designed, except for the cafeteria, which was converted into an art room, with pottery kilns located in what was previously the kitchen.

SOUHEGAN CAPACITY & UTILIZATION

Setting the Record Straight

As mentioned in the Background section, there has been some disagreement about whether the high school campus could be a viable option for relocating the seventh and eighth grades to help alleviate facility constraints in the lower grades—and if so, whether it should even be considered. This question was revisited in the JFAC section. The following sections aim to clarify the actual capacity and utilization of the high school campus and present a rationale for exploring the potential relocation of 7th and 8th grades to make use of available space.

This discussion remains theoretical and is based on high-level assumptions that would need to be thoroughly vetted through a formal feasibility study. Still, most other options have already been reviewed, and the high school campus has consistently been excluded from past studies. Much of the data needed to begin such an analysis already exists in previous reports. The next step would be to synthesize that information, evaluate the logistical and programmatic changes required, and assess whether the community is willing to embrace the cost and adaptations necessary to make it work.

Any feasibility study must include a thorough cost-benefit analysis that accounts for total costs—not just the direct costs of a single project. This means factoring in the capital maintenance needs across all facilities, not just those directly impacted by a proposed change. Both the high school and middle school are at a stage where significant capital investments are required, yet many of these needs are being deferred. This deferral appears, in part, to be a strategic decision aimed at avoiding the perception that additional large expenditures are imminent—perceptions that could jeopardize public support for the current bond proposal. However, deferring necessary investments only delays the inevitable and risks saddling the community with even higher costs down the road. A truly honest assessment must include the full scope of known and anticipated capital obligations in order to present a clear picture of long-term implications.

The Truth is Nuanced

As previously stated, the main building of Souhegan High School was designed for 700 students at 80% capacity, and the Annex was designed to hold 352 at 80% capacity. Based on these restrictions, at 80%, the campus can hold 1052 students. At 85% capacity, the school can comfortably accommodate over 1100 students. Furthermore, it should be noted that for these

calculations the capacity of the school was artificially limited by setting the maximum number of students per classroom at 20, regardless of the physical size of the room. This approach aligned with the philosophy of the Coalition of Essential Schools, which advocated for smaller class sizes to foster better learning environments. However, subsequent studies have shown that that principle is less critical at the high school level than at lower grades. At Souhegan today, with only a few exceptions, the maximum class size has been increased to 24, where appropriate.

Based on the number of classrooms the school was originally designed with, and calculating each room's capacity using its actual square footage at a rate of 32 square feet per student, the school's capacity is closer to 1300 students. However, several rooms have been reconfigured over time. For instance, the "learning commons" consists of four classrooms that were removed from the master schedule and are now a full-time study area, staffed by a full-time teacher and several tutors. Additionally, Annex rooms 103 and 107, originally smaller classrooms, are now combined into a single space for computer science. Other spaces, such as the school store and the Annex's "seminar rooms", could also be considered educational space.

Defining Capacity
The problem with these numbers, however, lies in the definitions of "educational space" and "capacity." According to the Department of Education (DOE):

Ed 321.09

The utilization rate of a school building shall be calculated by dividing the design capacity by the educational capacity and expressing the figure as a percentage. A 100 percent utilization rate shall not be required. For a proposed new building or addition to an existing building, the educational capacity shall be calculated by dividing the design capacity by the planned utilization rate. For purposes of determining eligibility for school building aid, planned utilization rates shall not be less than 85% for high schools, 90% for middle schools, and 95% for elementary schools. The minimum utilization rate shall not apply when only one general purpose classroom is assigned per grade.

Ed 321.10

(a) *Educational space shall include, but not be limited to, classrooms, laboratories, gymnasiums, and libraries.*

(i) *For high schools, a general purpose classroom shall contain a minimum of 800 square feet, including storage, or 32 square feet per student, whichever is greater.*

Defining Room Utilization
Based on the 2024-25 master schedule, there are between 20 and 33 classrooms unused during any given period of the day. These numbers include the gymnasium, seminar rooms, and all four classrooms that make up the learning commons, but do not include other potentially qualifying spaces such as the library, the school store (which is staffed by students taking various business courses and who receive community service hours), the weight room (which was previously an industrial arts room) or the auditorium. However, according to ***Ed 321.02 (f)*****,** *"Educational*

space" means those parts of a school building to which pupils are assigned for instructional purposes. Educational space includes, but is not limited to, classrooms, laboratories, gymnasiums, and libraries." Under this definition, many of the excluded areas could reasonably be considered educational spaces and thus factored into discussions of building utilization.

Instructional Drift: Filling All Available Space

These definitions notwithstanding, the utilization rate of the school is best measured by the number of classrooms in use and the number of students occupying those classrooms. Although Souhegan's enrollment has declined significantly, it still has a responsibility to offer a range of courses beyond the minimum state requirements. This includes rigorous STEM classes, Advanced Placement and dual enrollment programs, as well as a variety of engaging electives. Consequently, some class sizes may seem unusually small.

Given this, it's important to assess the master schedule periodically to ensure that the number of course sections remain aligned with the number of students. An excess of offerings can result in class sizes too small to justify the allocation of resources, while too few offerings can leave many students unable to access important courses. It can be tempting to take advantage of an abundance of space to allow too many sections to persist—essentially spreading instruction across the facility like a gas filling its container and occupying all available space.

Open Campus

Souhegan grants open campus privileges to juniors and seniors, allowing them to be on campus only when they have scheduled classes. This policy significantly impacts how the school's utilization rate should be interpreted. Many students with open periods choose to arrive later, leave early, or take a mid-day break, depending on where their open blocks fall. While they are permitted to leave campus during these times, a considerable number remain on-site, spending time in the Learning Commons or using unoccupied classrooms to study or socialize. As a result, between 50 and 135 students—or more—may be unaccounted for on the master schedule at any given time. Although the school has approximately 700 students enrolled, this means that fewer than 600 students may actually be present in the building during certain periods of the day, which must be taken into account when evaluating space usage and classroom demand.

Analysis

Assessing the utilization of the Souhegan High School campus reveals that the facility operates well below capacity. Depending on how space and enrollment are defined, the campus is using between 45% and 64% of its available capacity. This figure drops further when calculating based on actual student presence during any given period, due to the school's open campus policy for upperclassmen.

Enrollment by Period Fall Semester 2024-25									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Total Capacity	647	630	633	627	619	605	602	587	702
1300	50%	48%	49%	48%	48%	47%	46%	45%	54%
1200	54%	53%	53%	52%	52%	50%	50%	49%	59%
1100	59%	57%	58%	57%	56%	55%	55%	53%	64%

This table shows how Souhegan's space utilization varies depending on how capacity is defined. The top row reflects the number of students enrolled in each class period during the Fall 2024–25 semester. Below that, utilization percentages are shown based on three different capacity assumptions:

- ***1300 Students*** – Assumes maximum use of all available spaces, including flexible areas like the learning commons and school store, with classroom sizes based on minimum square footage per student.
- ***1200 Students*** – Assumes a more conservative estimate by excluding some flex spaces or using slightly smaller room counts.
- ***1100 Students*** – Reflects a more restrictive model using class size limits (e.g., 20 students per room), or removing additional shared spaces.

Room usage varies by period and by how many rooms are considered instructional. Even at the high end of assumptions, between 20 and 33 classrooms sit unused each period. The Annex alone operates at approximately 63% capacity, and the main building at about 56%. Attempting to relocate all current Annex classes into the main building would exceed the target utilization threshold of 85%, confirming that both buildings remain necessary under the current configuration.

	Rooms Used by Period Fall Semester 2024-25							
Total Rooms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
68	38	39	36	33	37	34	34	37
Utilization Rate	56%	57%	53%	49%	54%	50%	50%	54%
61	31	32	29	26	30	27	27	30
Utilization Rate	64%	66%	61%	56%	63%	58%	58%	63%

This table shows how many classrooms sat unused during each class period in Fall 2024–25. Two scenarios are presented:

- ***68 Rooms*** assumes a broader definition of instructional space, including all flexible-use rooms.
- ***61 Rooms*** excludes select multi-use or underutilized spaces.

Depending on which room count is used, between ***34% and 49%*** of rooms remained vacant during peak school hours—highlighting the significant underutilization of classroom space at Souhegan.

	Vacant Rooms by Period Fall Semester 2024-25							
Total Rooms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
68	28	27	30	33	29	32	32	29
Unutilized	41%	40%	44%	49%	43%	47%	47%	43%
61	21	20	23	26	22	25	25	22
Unutilized	34%	33%	38%	43%	36%	41%	41%	36%

This table presents the same data from a different angle—how many classrooms were actively used during each period. Utilization rates range from:

- ***49% to 57%** with 68 rooms included*
- ***56% to 66%** with a more conservative count of 61 rooms*

*No matter the assumption, the analysis shows that **dozens of rooms sit unused each period**, suggesting capacity exists to accommodate additional programming or grade levels without overcrowding.*

However, this underutilization presents a potential opportunity: relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan campus. With around 16 additional classrooms required, this move would keep the overall utilization below 85%—within the Department of Education's target. The Annex could serve as a physically distinct junior high wing, with the remaining surplus space supporting shared instructional use. This approach could address lower grade overcrowding without cutting programs or overhauling the high school schedule.

That said, this analysis is preliminary. It does not fully account for age-appropriate design, support facilities, or scheduling and staffing complexities. A detailed feasibility study would be needed to confirm the viability of any such change. (See attached appendix for more details.)

PLANNING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY: COSTS, RISKS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

BROADER CONSIDERATIONS

Scale of the Current Proposal

The proposed project has gone through at least three major iterations. In 2020, the initial proposal called for 163,500 square feet at a cost of $66,038,000. This version was withdrawn from the 2021 ballot after receiving critical public feedback. A revised proposal followed, reducing the size to 146,229 square feet with a price tag of $51,678,000. This version was bundled with a $30,492,000 renovation proposal for Amherst Middle School and included the first year's debt service, bringing the total ballot request to $83,000,000. It was defeated by a vote of 1,193 in favor to 1,902 against.

In 2023, the $30 million Amherst Middle School renovation was removed, and the scaled-back proposal—now a standalone project—was placed on the ballot for $54,250,179. It was again defeated, 1,549 in favor to 1,982 against.

In 2024, the project was reduced to 119,248 square feet and placed on the ballot at a cost of $49,997,214. The vote was 1,683 in favor to 1,431 against, marking a significant increase in support. For the first time, a majority—54.05%—voted in favor of the project.

In 2025, the same project was placed on the ballot again with an adjusted cost of $52,921,828 to account for inflation. The vote was 1,987 in favor to 1,648 against. Despite over 500 more total voters participating, the approval percentage rose only slightly to 54.66%.

To put these numbers into perspective, consider that the largest elementary school in New Hampshire—Golden Brook Elementary School in Windham—is 128,000 square feet and was designed for 1,200 students. That equates to approximately 107 square feet per student.

Scenario	Square Footage	Enrollment	Sq Ft per Student
Golden Brook (Windham, NH)	128,000	1200	107
Wilkins Plan 2020 (PK–5, 912 students)	163,500	912	179
Wilkins Plan 2022 (PK–5, 912 students)	146,229	912	160
Wilkins Plan 2023–25 (1–5, 750 students)	119,248	750	159
Wilkins Plan 2023–25 (1–5, 864 capacity)	119,248	864	138
Current Enrollment (1–5, 637 students)	119,248	637	187

The first two sets of plans for the Wilkins project included grades Pre-K through 5, with a high-water enrollment forecast of about 912 students by 2031. At 163,500 square feet, this would amount to 179 square feet per student. When scaled back to 146,229 square feet, the ratio decreased to 160 square feet per student.

In the third year, the project was further reduced to 119,248 square feet and reconfigured to serve only grades 1 through 5. With a projected peak enrollment of 750 students, this equates to approximately 159 square feet per student. However, the stated capacity of the school with added "flex space" is 864 students, which would bring the ratio to 138 square feet per student.

As of now, actual enrollment for grades 1 through 5 stands at 637 students.

Compared to Amherst Middle School
For additional context, Amherst Middle School (AMS) is 112,000 square feet and currently serves 630 students—approximately 178 square feet per student. The projected peak enrollment for AMS is 702 students by 2032, reducing the ratio to about 160 square feet per student.

The high-water enrollment forecast for grades Pre-K through 8 across the district is 1,069 students by 2033—just 157 more students than the proposed Wilkins project would be expected to accommodate. If grades 7 and 8 were housed in a separate facility and an addition were made to the existing AMS building, all 1,069 students could theoretically be served in one building. At 160 square feet per student, this would require an additional 59,040 square feet, bringing the total AMS footprint to 171,040 square feet.

Using the 2025 ballot measure cost estimate of approximately $440 per square foot, such an addition would cost just under $26 million.

Strategic Implications
This investment would allow the district to close two aging school buildings and consolidate all students in grades Pre-K through 8 within a single, expanded facility on the AMS campus. Combined with the existing Souhegan High School campus—just a few hundred yards away—this would streamline operations across two modern campuses, improving efficiency, reducing long-term maintenance costs, and simplifying transportation and staffing logistics.

As noted, the analysis thus far is based on general assumptions about room count and average enrollment. It does not account for essential operational and programmatic considerations, such as the appropriateness of certain spaces, the adequacy of support facilities, or how instructional needs might differ across grade levels. These oversights make it clear that space utilization data alone cannot serve as the sole basis for such a substantial structural change.

Reexamining Assumptions About Existing Space
The analysis assumed that certain non-classroom spaces—such as the learning commons and seminar rooms—could be reconfigured for general classroom use. However, repurposing these areas may reduce academic flexibility or require trade-offs in programming. Furthermore, the original cafeteria was already undersized when the high school was at full capacity. With the auxiliary cafeteria now functioning as an art room, food service capacity will likely be a significant limitation if more students are added to the campus. Similarly, the high school library likely contains material not suitable for younger students, underscoring the need for separate facilities tailored to developmental needs.

Functional and Structural Gaps
Past architectural and programmatic reviews may already contain some of the necessary remedies needed to address current facility challenges. Recent assessments show that the existing gym facilities are likely inadequate for a larger student population and would require upgrades. Additionally, the separation between the main building and the Annex poses logistical and safety concerns. The Gale Report included recommendations for an expanded cafeteria and covered access between the two buildings, as well as rerouting the access road around the Annex. It may be worthwhile to explore the feasibility of incorporating additional instructional space as part of any future construction or renovation efforts.

Conceptual Scope for Future Expansion
To make such a consolidation feasible, a capital expansion would likely be necessary. A concept that may be worth consideration includes constructing an auxiliary gym, expanding the cafeteria, building an age-appropriate auxiliary library, and adding a number of classrooms. A recommendation made the Gale Report in 2010 included constructing a connecting structure between the Annex and main building could provide both accessibility and additional instructional or support spaces. As a reference point, the 40,000 sq. ft. Annex was built in 2003 for $12.5 million. Adjusted for inflation, a comparable investment in 2025 could range from $13.75 to $24.5 million, depending on final size, function, and design quality.

Strategic Opportunity for Coordination and Further Study
This moment presents a valuable opportunity to align facilities planning with a separate, ongoing analysis focused on restructuring the high school science labs. Coordinating both efforts could yield design efficiencies and more effective use of space. However, to move from concept to implementation, a detailed feasibility study will be required—one that considers curriculum alignment, scheduling logistics, staffing implications, security planning, and the student experience. This next phase should also examine the potential for shared services and explore how such a change might alleviate overcrowding in the district's elementary schools.

Recommendations for Utilizing the Surplus Space
While operating a high school at full capacity is not ideal, operating significantly below capacity also comes with its own set of pros and cons. The most significant advantage is the abundance of usable space. At Souhegan, this surplus has allowed the school to create a large collaborative area carved out of four separate classrooms. The Learning Commons provides students with a retreat where they can receive tutoring from veteran teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as collaborate with their peers. This space also provides an incentive for upperclassman to remain safely on campus during their free periods.

The most significant drawback of having excess space is the overhead cost associated with maintaining underutilized facilities. When approximately 40% of classrooms are empty during any given period, the district still incurs expenses for heating, cooling, cleaning, and general maintenance of those unused areas. This inefficiency places a financial strain on the operating budget, diverting resources that could otherwise be allocated to instruction, staffing, or targeted facility improvements.

Over the past few years, Souhegan has engaged the Amherst School District several times offering to consider ways to help alleviate the space issues at the lower school.

Moving the Pre-k program from the Clark School to the Souhegan campus
In 2023, the Amherst School Board asked the Souhegan School Board to consider establishing a Career and Technical Education (CTE) program in child development by relocating the district's pre-K program to the high school campus. After review, it was determined that hosting such a program was inconsistent with both the structure and educational focus of Souhegan High School. Additionally, the nature of the campus environment was not well suited to the needs of an early childhood program.

Relocating the Maker Space to the Souhegan Campus
Amherst Middle School (AMS) houses the Amherst Maker Space, which is administered by the Amherst Recreation Department. This industrial workshop contains advanced equipment, including band saws, table saws, laser cutters, and 3D printers. The Maker Space occupies two large areas within the middle school building. However, because the equipment is too advanced and potentially dangerous for middle school students to use, it currently serves no direct educational purpose for the school's curriculum.

In 2024, the Souhegan Cooperative School Board approached the Amherst School Board to propose transferring the Maker Space equipment to the high school campus, where it would be integrated into the curriculum for an introductory CTE program for underclassmen, as well as serve as a practical engineering center in the science department. More details about the Maker Space its potential educational applications are provided later in the document.

Seventh & Eighth Grades
The Souhegan Cooperative School Board approached the Amherst School Board in both 2022 and 2023 to propose consideration of relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan campus. In both cases, the Amherst School Board rebuffed Souhegan's offer, and no comprehensive analysis was ever performed.

GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Among the proposals currently under consideration, relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan campus offers the greatest potential to relieve space constraints at the lower elementary level. Beyond easing overcrowding, shifting these grades under the Souhegan umbrella would strengthen vertical alignment between middle and high school—a long-standing point of friction—while also improving district governance and insulating the community from a host of emerging challenges.

Balanced Authority

For the proposal to relocate seventh and eighth grades to the high school campus to be most effective, it would need to include a governance shift placing those grades within the Souhegan Cooperative School District. While previous consolidation efforts encountered political and logistical hurdles, today's landscape is markedly different. Declining enrollment, intensifying fiscal pressures, and expanding cross-district collaboration suggest it's time to revisit the question out of practical necessity.

District	ADM	ADM/16	Additional Votes
Amherst	1313	82.06	82
Mont Vernon	234	14.63	15
Souhegan	701	43.81	44

Under SAU 39's weighted voting system, additional votes are allocated to each district based on their Average Daily Membership (ADM), calculated as one vote per 16 students. This ensures proportional representation based on student enrollment. As shown in the table, Amherst receives 82 additional votes, Mont Vernon receives 15, and Souhegan receives 44. Because Amherst has more students than Mont Vernon and Souhegan combined, it holds a majority of the weighted votes—giving it effective control over decisions during joint SAU board meetings when weighted voting is invoked

This move would also help ease tensions between the Amherst and Mont Vernon School Districts. Mont Vernon, an equity partner in the Souhegan Cooperative, has proportional representation on the Souhegan School Board. However, it currently pays tuition to Amherst for its seventh and eighth graders to attend the middle school, without having significant input into the administration of that school. The capital cost-sharing agreement related to facility improvements are widely viewed in Mont Vernon as unfair and disproportionate. Integrating seventh and eighth grades into the Souhegan Cooperative would resolve these concerns and streamline governance.

Weighted Voting

In SAU 39, decisions made at Joint Board meetings follow a unique voting system designed to balance fairness between districts of different sizes. Each of the three member districts—Amherst, Mont Vernon, and the Souhegan Cooperative School District—has its own school board, and members from those boards come together to form the SAU Joint Board.

By default, each district gets a total of three votes at Joint Board meetings, regardless of how many members attend. Those three votes are divided equally among the members present. So, if five Amherst Board members attend a meeting, each casts 0.6 votes. If only two Mont Vernon members are present, each casts 1.5 votes. This setup ensures equal representation on paper, but it also means that a district with more board members in attendance can carry more influence in practice.

There's also an option for weighted voting, which—according to policy BBBH ('Weighted votes shall only be used upon the demand of a majority of the members of any board present and voting in the school administrative unit')—can be invoked for major decisions like adopting the SAU budget or hiring a new superintendent.

Weighted voting assigns each district one vote for every 16 students, plus an additional vote if there are at least 8 more students beyond a multiple of 16. These votes are then divided equally among the members present from that district. Weighted voting must be requested by a majority of the members from any one district at the meeting.

Because Amherst has more students than Mont Vernon and Souhegan combined, it carries significantly more weight in any weighted vote. This gives Amherst the ability to effectively outvote the other two districts, especially in matters that affect the elementary and middle school levels. While Mont Vernon is a full partner in the Souhegan Cooperative School District—with proportional representation on the Souhegan School Board—its influence over Amherst Middle School is limited, as it participates only through a tuition agreement. Mont Vernon does not share governance over the middle school but still sends its seventh and eighth graders there and pays tuition accordingly.

This creates a governance imbalance: Amherst controls the middle school, but Mont Vernon's students are directly affected by decisions made there. The result is a persistent source of tension between the two districts, as Mont Vernon has limited formal input into decisions that impact its students' daily educational experience. These dynamics have added complexity to broader SAU-level discussions, especially when weighted voting magnifies Amherst's influence in joint decisions.

7-MEMBER BOARD	
Members in Attendance	Each Member's Vote
7	0.429
6	0.500
5	0.600
4	0.750
3	1.000
2	1.500
1	3.000

5-MEMBER BOARD	
Members in Attendance	Each Member's Vote
5	0.600
4	0.750
3	1.000
2	1.500
1	3.000

These tables show how voting weights adjust based on member attendance for SAU 39 Joint Board meetings. The goal is to maintain consistent voting power for each district, even when not all members are present.

7-Member Boards (e.g., Amherst or Souhegan) and 5-Member Boards (e.g., Mont Vernon) use this system to equalize influence.
As attendance decreases, each member's vote carries more weight to ensure their district's overall voting share stays proportional.
For example, if only 3 members of a 7-member board attend, each vote is worth 1.000 instead of 0.429 when all 7 are present.
This system ensures fair representation regardless of attendance, preserving balance across participating districts.

Relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan Cooperative School District would help restore balance to the current governance structure. Unlike the existing tuition agreement, which leaves Mont Vernon without direct decision-making authority over middle school programming, placing these grades under the Cooperative District would ensure that both Amherst and Mont Vernon have formal representation through their seats on the Souhegan School Board. This change would give Mont Vernon a voice in decisions affecting its students and create a more equitable structure for managing shared resources, aligning curriculum, and addressing student needs. It would also reduce the administrative and political complexity of maintaining separate governance systems for consecutive grade levels, streamlining oversight and fostering a greater sense of partnership between the two towns.

Collective Bargain Structure
Souhegan Cooperative School District uses a Policy Planning Committee (PPC) model for negotiating staff agreements, while the Amherst School District operates under a traditional collective bargaining structure affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA). These two approaches differ significantly in structure, process, and scope of negotiation.

1. ***NEA Model (Amherst):***
   In this format, educators are represented by a formal union—NEA-New Hampshire—which negotiates a binding collective bargaining agreement with the school district. This agreement covers salaries, benefits, working conditions, and grievance procedures. The NEA provides legal support, bargaining expertise, and statewide advocacy, giving teachers leverage in contract negotiations. However, this model can be more rigid, with contract terms requiring formal negotiation to change.

2. ***PPC Model (Souhegan):***
   At Souhegan, the PPC is a local collaborative committee of teachers and administrators that jointly develops and periodically revises the faculty agreement. While not a union in the legal sense, the PPC agreement functions similarly in outlining compensation, benefits, and working conditions. The process is less adversarial and often more flexible, allowing both sides to adapt policies quickly as needs evolve. However, because it lacks formal union protections, it may offer less outside support or legal recourse in disputes.

Sharing resources
If grades 7 and 8 are relocated to the Souhegan High School campus, there are two primary governance models under consideration, each with different implications for staffing, labor relations, and operational integration:

1. ***Remain Under Amherst School District Governance***
   In this model, seventh and eighth grade students would occupy space on the Souhegan campus but continue to be governed by the Amherst School District. This approach could simplify staffing transitions in the short term, as Amherst teachers are represented by the NEA and would remain under their existing collective bargaining agreement. Maintaining separate governance would also allow current staff to avoid disruption to their employment status or benefits.

2. ***Transition to the Souhegan Cooperative School District***
   Alternatively, grades 7 and 8 could be fully integrated into the Souhegan Cooperative District, which would require dissolving their current positions under Amherst (through a Reduction in Force process) and rehiring them under Souhegan. While this would involve more complex labor negotiations—particularly since Souhegan does not operate under a traditional union structure but instead uses a Policy Planning Committee (PPC) model—it would enable much greater flexibility in sharing staff and aligning programming. Teachers could move more fluidly between grades 7–12, allowing for better instructional continuity and more efficient use of specialized faculty.

Each option carries trade-offs. Keeping the grades under Amherst simplifies employment transitions but limits long-term resource alignment. Moving them to the Cooperative requires

more upfront coordination but opens the door to deeper academic integration and operational efficiency.

ACADEMIC ADVANTAGES

Souhegan's Philosophy - Grounded in the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) model, places a strong emphasis on social and emotional development. Transitioning seventh and eighth graders into a junior high model that incorporates the Advisory program would provide them with structured support during a critical stage of adolescence. The presence of trained staff and supportive upperclassmen would help address the emotional and developmental challenges of early adolescence—support that the current PreK–8 elementary framework is not well equipped to provide.

While concerns about the developmental appropriateness of co-locating younger and older students are valid, any relocation would maintain a distinct junior high model with physical and programmatic separation. Existing campus design and excess capacity provide flexibility that many other districts do not have.

Academic Opportunities - In addition to addressing space and operational concerns, consolidating seventh and eighth grades on the high school campus offers clear academic benefits. Proximity to the high school would give junior high students greater access to advanced coursework, specialized faculty, and enrichment opportunities that are not currently available at the middle school. Areas such as foreign language instruction, performing and visual arts, and advanced science and technology would be particularly well supported in this integrated setting—creating a more dynamic and challenging academic environment for students ready to

While most of the planning discussions have focused on facilities and finances, students themselves have offered a consistent message in informal conversations and feedback: the learning environment at Souhegan feels more empowering. Several students and parents have noted that the high school fosters greater agency, more individualized learning pathways, and stronger student-teacher relationships than the middle school. These perceptions align with the proposed junior high model's goal of easing transitions, enhancing engagement, and stabilizing growth during critical developmental years. As one student who returned to Souhegan after attending private school shared:
"There is no downside to me coming back to this school."

accelerate while also providing stronger, more targeted support for students who benefit from increased structure, consistency, and individualized instruction.

Her comment speaks to the sense of belonging, support, and opportunity that many students experience at Souhegan—qualities that a well-structured junior high model could extend into the earlier grades.

Retaining Students from Middle School Through High School - While most students remain within the SAU from kindergarten through graduation, every year a handful of rising freshmen choose to leave the district for private, parochial, or specialized schools. Some families seek enhanced academic or athletic opportunities, but a portion of these departures stem from dissatisfaction with the middle school experience itself. To be fair, middle school is difficult almost everywhere—adolescence arrives fast, and puberty often hits like a ton of bricks. But for some students, the transition from elementary school to a separate middle school—distinct in culture, governance, and even identity—can feel especially jarring. Amherst Middle School serves grades five through eight, but Mont Vernon students join the school in seventh grade through a tuition agreement, meaning they face two transitions in rapid succession: one at the start of seventh grade and another just two years later when entering high school. This compressed experience can be particularly disorienting, weakening students' sense of academic and social continuity.

One simple but telling example is the mascot. Amherst Middle School and Souhegan High School belong to different districts and, accordingly, represent different school identities: the Eagles and the Sabers (sabretooth tigers), respectively. While symbolic, this split reinforces the sense that students are crossing into an entirely new system—rather than progressing through a unified academic journey. Aligning seventh and eighth grades with the high school, even loosely, would begin to create a more coherent culture—one that emphasizes shared expectations, consistent support systems, and a sense of belonging that starts earlier and runs deeper. This kind of structural cohesion could help retain students who might otherwise opt out—not because of academic weakness or lack of opportunity, but because they never fully found their place in the current configuration.

Aligning the Curriculum and Academic Standards - Consolidating seventh and eighth grades into a stand-alone junior high within the Souhegan Cooperative District offers significant academic and developmental advantages. By unifying these transitional years under a single governance and instructional model, the district can reduce the disruption typically associated with the shift from middle to high school—one of the most challenging periods for student engagement and performance. A junior high structure allows for better vertical alignment of curriculum and expectations, ensuring that students enter high school with a stronger foundation in core subjects and essential skills. It also creates a more intentional academic progression, giving educators the ability to identify and address inconsistent growth patterns—such as those often seen in NWEA results—before students begin earning grades that appear on their high school transcripts. This continuity helps mitigate learning gaps, stabilizes academic performance,

and provides students with the confidence and preparedness needed to succeed in high school and beyond.

Foreign Language - State education policy mandates that students who take foreign language courses at the middle school level receive high school credit. This has contributed to under-enrollment in introductory-level foreign language classes at Souhegan, which in turn has led to a reduction in the number of languages offered. By leveraging the high school's teaching capacity and facilities, integrating the lower grades could boost enrollment in entry-level courses and potentially expand the number of languages available.

Support for the Arts - The arts programs at Souhegan have also suffered from declining enrollment. As students face more graduation requirements and elective options, arts participation has diminished. This has led to low enrollment or the consolidation of multiple levels—introductory, intermediate, and advanced—into single sections. With seventh and eighth graders on campus, these underutilized programs—including band, chorus, visual arts, and a state-of-the-art theater and auditorium—would receive a much-needed infusion of participants.

STEM Opportunities - As the high school is already in the process of restructuring its science labs, there is an opportunity to configure the science rooms in the Annex for "light science" programming that goes beyond what typical middle school courses provide. Additionally, students may benefit from access to the renovated high school labs, gaining exposure to more advanced equipment and concepts.

Opportunities for Acceleration and Support - Placing seventh and eighth grades in close proximity to the high school—and under the same district governance—would unlock a wide range of academic and developmental opportunities. While Souhegan and Amherst currently collaborate to support exceptional students who wish to accelerate, the process is far from seamless. For example, a middle school student wishing to take an advanced math course at the high school must arrange to walk between the two buildings on a tight schedule, and the districts must coordinate a tuition transfer. In a junior high model, proximity and governance barriers would no longer stand in the way—making it easier to offer tailored acceleration without requiring dramatic leaps, like a seventh grader taking calculus. Eighth graders could more naturally take select ninth-grade courses, and seventh graders could be placed in advanced eighth-grade sections as needed.

At the same time, this structure would also allow for more subtle and flexible support on the other end of the spectrum. Students who need additional reinforcement in core areas could receive targeted instruction without being pulled from their grade-level environment, and without the stigma often associated with formal remediation. Because teacher certifications frequently span grades K–8 or 7–12, staff could be scheduled to work fluidly across levels—offering the right students the right support at the right time.

Special education programming - would also benefit. The Transitions program at Souhegan could expand to serve more students, offering services such as self-care training, occupational and physical therapy, speech-language support, and access to a school psychologist and social worker. A larger student population would create economies of scale, making it possible to offer more comprehensive services at a lower per-student cost.

Addressing Deferred Maintenance Across the District - The initial bond request included $54 million for the reconstruction of the Wilkins Elementary School and an additional $30 million earmarked for capital repairs and upgrades at Amherst Middle School. After the bond failed to secure the required supermajority for passage, the middle school component was removed in favor of a phased, long-term approach to maintenance. Still, the lack of significant upgrades at Wilkins over many years remains a key concern in the community. When coupled with millions in deferred projects at the middle school and known infrastructure needs at Souhegan—particularly the outdated science labs—many residents are reluctant to endorse such a large capital investment without a clear and comprehensive plan. There is a growing sense that other costly projects are looming just beyond the horizon.

If the decision is ultimately made to relocate seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan campus—and if modest construction is necessary to facilitate that move—it may make more sense to address deferred maintenance across the district in a coordinated way. This could include taking advantage of operational synergies by tackling renovations at the high school and middle school concurrently, while reducing the scale of necessary work at Wilkins. One alternative worth exploring is a full investment in the middle and high school campuses, which could allow the district to decommission the aging Wilkins and Clark facilities altogether—significantly reducing the long-term capital burden.

Capital Needs Across the Community - The Town of Amherst Capital Improvements Plan (CIP) Committee operates under the umbrella of the town's Community Development Department and is composed of representatives from the two school districts and the Board of Selectmen. Each year, the committee develops a list of capital needs across the community, including projects for town departments such as police, fire, public works, recreation, in addition to the schools. Some of the non-school-related needs currently identified include a community center, a replacement tower truck for the fire department, upgrades to the dispatch communications system, and improvements to public works facilities.

Which projects ultimately move forward depends on the shifting priorities of the community. For the past several years, the Wilkins School replacement project has consistently been ranked as a top priority, resulting in the deferral of millions of dollars in other critical investments. However, because the Wilkins project has been delayed or rejected for the past five years, many of these other needs have grown more urgent—placing increasing pressure on the town to rebalance its capital priorities.

This deferral strategy has also had ripple effects within the school system. The condition of the Wilkins School has deteriorated in part because key capital maintenance projects were put on hold in anticipation of the bond's passage. At Souhegan High School, sorely needed science lab updates that have been planned since 2018 and HVAC upgrades in the Annex have been delayed. Budgeted purchases such as furniture and carpet replacements were also postponed. In many cases, maintenance that might have otherwise required its own bond has been phased and funded out of capital reserves or operating budgets—further straining district resources. Across the board, the community has absorbed these delays in good faith, but continuing to wait for the perfect solution may ultimately leave everyone worse off.

The longer the Wilkins project remains unresolved, the more strain it places on the town's ability to meet other pressing needs. It's time for the district to consider solutions that allow progress for the entire community.

CASCADING EFFECT ON UTILIZATION ACROSS FACILITIES

As previously discussed, relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan campus would shift approximately 350 students out of the middle school. This move would create a cascading effect throughout the district, freeing up significant space and effectively adding capacity across the school system. In terms of impact, it could yield benefits comparable to building a new elementary school—without requiring full facility construction.

Importantly, this approach acknowledges the political, demographic, and economic uncertainties currently facing public education. By optimizing existing infrastructure rather than pursuing a major new capital project, the district can respond more flexibly to enrollment fluctuations and funding challenges while still addressing critical space constraints in the lower grades.

Moving 350 seventh- and eighth-grade students from the middle school would free up 16 classrooms, enabling the district to relocate fourth grade to the middle school building, creating an upper elementary school. This would allow the elementary school to finally decommission the two remaining portable classroom trailers that have housed four fourth-grade classrooms for decades. Additionally, there would be more room to decrease class sizes in all the remaining grade levels.

As the Wilkins school would now be exclusively a lower elementary school, a smaller-scale renovation and addition could be pursued, requiring less site work and fewer amenities such as a full-sized gymnasium and extensive age-appropriate playground equipment. The district would have the option of retaining Clark School or relocating the pre-k and kindergarten programs the newly renovated Wilkins School, opening the door to repurposing the Clark building or exploring alternative applications. Additionally, redistributing grades and buildings outside the village core would help alleviate a significant amount of traffic congestion in the village.

Two Buildings

After relocating seventh and eighth grades to the high school campus and moving fourth grade to the middle school—now functioning as an upper elementary school—transportation becomes increasingly disjointed. With pre-K through third grade on one end of town and grades four through six on the other, bus routes become more complex and potentially more expensive.

Using the aborted 1998 attempt to find a home for fourth grade on the middle school campus as inspiration, one option that has not been seriously explored—but may warrant careful consideration—is fully retiring the Clark and Wilkins campuses and redirecting all construction funding toward expanding the existing high school and middle school facilities. With targeted additions and renovations, these two campuses could accommodate all students from pre-K through grade 12 in just two buildings, while simultaneously addressing many of the district's outstanding deferred maintenance needs. Under this model, the current middle school building would serve the full span of elementary grades—potentially organized into distinct lower and upper elementary groupings—while the high school campus would support both a junior high (grades 7–8) and the traditional high school (grades 9–12).

Beyond relocating fourth grade, the availability of an additional 10 classrooms raises the possibility of also moving third grade to the middle school facility. With that shift, approximately seven more classrooms would be freed up at Wilkins, leaving about three classrooms still open in the middle school. This opens the door to further strategic reconfiguration. Given this potential surplus of capacity, it may be prudent to evaluate whether a modest addition to the middle school could accommodate all students in pre-K through grade six, allowing the district to fully consolidate elementary and middle school programming on one campus and retire both the Clark and Wilkins buildings.

As of the fall of 2024, grades pre-K through 6 occupy 37 classrooms. Based on the most aggressive forecasts, accommodating students in pre-K through grade four could require up to 46 classrooms. With 16 classrooms already available in the existing building (excluding the Maker Space), an additional 30 classrooms would need to be constructed. Using a general guideline of approximately 1,000 square feet per classroom, this translates to 30,000 square feet of new instructional space. Applying the standard "gross-up" ratio of 1.5 to 1.6—which accounts for hallways, mechanical systems, restrooms, and other non-instructional areas—the total footprint would range from approximately 45,000 to 48,000 square feet. For context, this is 12.5 to 20% larger than the existing Annex building. Even after factoring in additional ancillary spaces such as administrative offices, a multipurpose room or auxiliary gymnasium, and expanded food service capacity, the total expansion would remain significantly smaller—and likely far more cost-effective—than the full-scale Wilkins project currently under consideration.

This configuration could also streamline transportation by enabling a single bus run for all students, offering potential cost savings. Currently, Amherst uses two separate bus runs: one for elementary students, and a second for middle and high school students, which share a single bus loop. Because the elementary and secondary campuses are located on opposite sides of town—and due to Amherst's rural geography and declining enrollment—many buses operate below capacity, with routes that are at least partially empty. A consolidated campus could significantly reduce inefficiencies and lower the cost of the bus contract and other expenses.

This approach could also be phased strategically. The district could begin by relocating seventh and eighth grades to the high school campus and shifting fourth grade—along with, potentially, third grade—to the current middle school, which would begin operating as an upper elementary facility. This initial step would immediately relieve pressure on Wilkins, allow for the decommissioning of the portables, and create flexibility for class size adjustments. In the near term, modest renovations and expansions to the high school—such as additional cafeteria or gymnasium space, as well as minor interior reconfigurations—would be necessary to accommodate the junior high. Meanwhile, the Clark and Wilkins buildings could be maintained in a safe and functional state, preserving them for transitional use until a full consolidation plan is finalized. This phased model offers a fiscally responsible, educationally sound, and politically achievable path forward—allowing the district to adapt in measured steps while continuing to evaluate long-term needs.

Repurposing Clark-Wilkins

Discontinuing use of the Clark and Wilkins buildings could open new opportunities for community use. While the Recreation Department has long advocated for a dedicated community center, the existing Wilkins facility could serve as a highly viable alternative—particularly as a senior and recreation center. The building's kitchen and multipurpose room

would offer an ideal setting for the Meals on Wheels program, which currently operates out of Hampshire Hills, and could also support a variety of other community-based services and events, and youth athletics. The existing classrooms could be repurposed for adult education, civic group meetings, and activities spaces for organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Gardening Club. In addition, the town-operated Maker Space could be relocated from the middle school to a more appropriate standalone setting, better suited to its mission and equipment needs.

Moreover, the fields surrounding Wilkins already serve an important role for the Recreation Department. Both the lower and upper Wilkins Fields are currently used as practice fields for youth football and soccer. The lower field, in particular, is highly valued due to its lower elevation, which makes it possible to install portable lights for evening practices without disturbing nearby residents. Repurposing the Wilkins building while maintaining access to these outdoor facilities could offer the town a cost-effective way to expand community services without requiring new construction.

The Clark building could also offer practical value for non-instructional purposes. One option would be to repurpose the facility as office space for the SAU and potentially for municipal departments. Currently, the SAU operates out of the historic Brick School in the center of the village—an aging former schoolhouse that is cramped, lacks modern amenities, and is not ADA accessible. Transitioning administrative functions to the Clark building would provide more adequate space, improve accessibility, and free up the Brick School for alternative uses or eventual disposition. In combination with the repurposing of Wilkins as a senior and community center, this approach would maximize the value of existing district-owned facilities while meeting a broader range of community needs.

Retaining the Clark and Wilkins buildings provides the community with long-term flexibility. Whether repurposed for administrative functions, community programs, or municipal use, these facilities remain valuable public assets. While future educational use may be unlikely—especially if the district consolidates operations to a single campus—preserving the properties avoids premature disposal of land that could serve evolving civic needs. This approach allows the town to remain adaptable while maximizing the usefulness of its existing infrastructure.

Comparing Costs

A true comparative cost-benefit analysis (CBA) evaluates multiple options by examining both short- and long-term costs and weighing them against expected benefits. It includes not only upfront construction expenses, but also lifecycle costs such as maintenance, staffing, and operations, along with potential academic, logistical, and community gains. A proper CBA also accounts for risk, uses a consistent time frame across scenarios, and considers both financial and non-financial impacts.

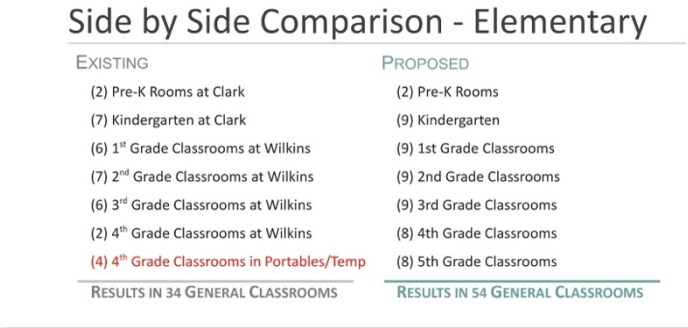
In the context of the Wilkins project, a full CBA would compare the current rebuild proposal to alternatives like relocating grades seven and eight to the high school campus or renovating existing facilities. It would move beyond surface-level comparisons to assess how each option affects programming, governance, long-term flexibility, and public trust—providing a more grounded basis for determining the best path forward.

To date, much of the public discussion has focused on estimated project costs in isolation, without fully accounting for the opportunity costs of committing to a single, large-scale facility or the potential benefits of deferring action to pursue more integrated and adaptive strategies. Without a comprehensive CBA, decisions risk being shaped by emotion, assumptions, or incomplete data—rather than by a clear understanding of which solution offers the greatest long-term value for students and taxpayers.

Costs of the Proposed Project

Beyond the cost of physically demolishing and reconstructing the Wilkins School, relatively little is known about the full range of additional costs associated with the project. In a side-by-side comparison, the proposal indicates that the new facility would yield an additional twenty classrooms, eight of which would accommodate the relocated fifth grade. The remaining additions include two kindergarten classrooms, three first-grade classrooms, two second-grade classrooms, three third-grade classrooms, two fourth-grade classrooms, and two more fifth-grade classrooms. In addition to the substantial annual debt service, the project would require funding for at least 12 new teachers and associated support staff to accommodate the expanded classroom capacity.

Moreover, some of the estimated construction-related costs—such as site work and paving of roads and parking lots—have not yet been fully engineered. A key component of the plan involves building a new road to support a proposed parking lot and a bus circulation route. This road would need to climb a steep incline from the lower Wilkins area to the upper field, eventually connecting to Jones Road, which could add significant unforeseen costs to the project.



*This table outlines the proposed classroom increases under the original Wilkins School rebuild plan. Based on standard staffing ratios, the expansion could require **at least 12 new teachers**, with additional support staff likely needed. However, actual staffing levels could vary significantly depending on how the building is ultimately configured and whether **enrollment trends continue to decline**. While the current projection assumes full utilization, persistent demographic shifts could reduce the number of new hires required—highlighting the importance of aligning facility planning with long-term population data.*

Once completed, the project would significantly increase traffic through the village during drop-off and pick-up times. While the proposed design would accommodate additional traffic within the school facility itself, it does not mitigate the increased number of cars and buses passing through Boston Post Road, Jones Road, and Mack Hill Road, areas already experiencing traffic concerns. The existing roadways cannot be widened and will be required to absorb the additional flow, potentially exacerbating what is already a contentious issue for local residents.

COSTS OF DELAYING THE PROPOSED PROJECT

Addressing the Condition of Wilkins

The benefits of tearing down and rebuilding the Wilkins School building, as currently proposed, are largely centered on addressing the poor condition and over utilization of the existing facility. With the school board confident in the likelihood of passing a bond, significant long-term investments in the building have been deferred in favor of essential maintenance only. This approach reflects a strategic decision not to commit resources to a structure anticipated for demolition, but it has also contributed to the school's deteriorating state—a key factor now being used to justify the proposed rebuild.

Sunk Costs

After five years of planning, community engagement, and four failed bond votes, the district stands at a critical juncture. While sunk costs—both financial and procedural—should not dictate future decisions, they underscore the significant investment already made in understanding the district's needs. Abandoning that work entirely would forfeit hard-earned insights and further delay much-needed solutions. A more strategic approach is to build on that foundation with a plan that addresses community concerns, adapts to changing conditions, and restores momentum before the window for meaningful action narrows further.

Inflation

One of the most immediate concerns is the rising cost of construction. Continued inflation in labor and materials could increase the overall price tag, meaning that postponement may result in a more expensive project in the future—even if the scope remains unchanged. In addition, uncertainty in the bond market adds another layer of financial risk. Locking in borrowing now, while costly, may ultimately prove more fiscally responsible than attempting to re-enter the market later under less favorable or more volatile conditions.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Realigning the Grade Configuration

Another stated benefit of the project is the creation of space to relocate the fifth grade from the middle school to the new elementary facility. This change is framed as an effort to realign the fifth grade within a more age-appropriate, elementary-level configuration. While there is interest in gaining additional flexibility and storage, it's worth noting that the middle school is not currently facing the extreme space constraints as the Clark-Wilkins campus. Additionally, relocating the fifth grade does not address the continued operation of the Clark School—a facility whose closure was part of the initial rationale for pursuing a new building, particularly by consolidating pre-K and kindergarten into a modern, purpose-built space. Re-examining the sequencing of priorities could help ensure the project more fully meets its original objectives.

Maker Space

It is also worth noting, as mentioned earlier, that the middle school contains space currently used by the town-operated Maker Space, which does not serve a direct educational function during the school day. This area comprises two large classroom-sized rooms located behind the gymnasium, accessible only through adjoining classrooms—an arrangement that makes them impractical for traditional instructional use. Originally, the equipment in the space was intended to support the school's *Innovation & Design* program, which introduced students to foundational concepts in

Career and Technical Education (CTE). However, since being transitioned into a subscription-based community Maker Space operated by the Amherst Recreation Department—from which the school derives significant revenue—much of the equipment is now considered too advanced or unsafe for middle school students. While the layout may limit its use as classroom space, the area could potentially serve other important functions—such as much-needed storage or collaborative workspaces for educators—both of which have been identified as needs in various planning discussions.

While many commonly cited benefits of new school construction—such as enhanced educational outcomes, improved safety, and long-term cost savings—could likely have been achieved through more timely investment in existing facilities, there are still a few notable advantages worth considering. Chief among them is the potential to consolidate PreK–5 programming under one roof, reducing fragmentation and aligning with long-standing educational goals. A new building may also offer improved internal scheduling flexibility and more functional space allocation, which could enhance daily operations. Additionally, while difficult to quantify, updated facilities can contribute to staff morale and recruitment efforts.

Grade	September 2024	Avg. Class Size	Rooms	
PK	34	10	3	
K	137	20	7	
1	114	16	7	
2	138	20	7	
3	133	19	7	
4	127	22	6	
5	124	21	6	807
6	152	19	8	
7	174	22	8	
8	184	23	8	358
Total	1317		61	

This table shows current student enrollment by grade along with average class sizes across the Amherst School District. Grades Pre-K through 5 serve 807 students, while grades 7 and 8 account for 358 students—6th grade is the only grade level not affected by either plan. Average class sizes vary by grade, from 10 in Pre-K to the low 20s in upper elementary and middle school. These figures are essential for evaluating facility needs, staffing requirements, and long-term planning—especially as the district considers how best to allocate space and resources across its campuses.

Athletics

Relocating seventh and eighth grades to a separate facility on the high school campus would change the current arrangement of middle school athletics. Currently, Amherst students in grades five through eight participate under the umbrella of the Tri-County League Middle School–Junior High Interscholastic Athletic League, which oversees athletic programs for middle-level students across the region. While the league allows fifth through eighth graders to participate, most teams are already structured as separate programs for grades 5–6 and 7–8. In practice, fifth-grade participation is uncommon, and sixth-grade students may be invited to "play up" on a seventh- and eighth-grade team depending on sport, skill level, and team needs.

If seventh and eighth graders were moved to a separate school—both physically and administratively distinct from the existing middle school—they would no longer be eligible to participate jointly with students in grades five and six. According to the Tri-County League Handbook, "All students in the designated Middle School/Junior High School and in grades five through eight will be eligible to compete in League-sponsored contests as long as they are

housed in the school they represent and meet the eligibility standards set forth by their local board of education" (Tri-County League Handbook, p. 8). Under this rule, Amherst's model could shift to two distinct sets of teams—one for students housed at the middle school (grades 5–6) and another for those at the junior high (grades 7–8).

In addition, the Tri-County League rules could have implications for Mont Vernon. If seventh and eighth grades remain at the Amherst Middle School under a non-cooperative model, and Mont Vernon were to end its tuition agreement to send students there, its seventh and eighth graders would likely lose access to Tri-County League athletics. Given Mont Vernon's smaller student population, the district would be unlikely to field independent teams at those grade levels, significantly limiting extracurricular opportunities for its students. However, if Mont Vernon's seventh and eighth graders were instead included within the Souhegan Cooperative structure—alongside their current participation in the high school—this issue would be avoided. The cooperative model would ensure access to shared athletic programs and preserve continuity in both academics and extracurricular activities, offering a stronger incentive for Mont Vernon to maintain its relationship within the shared district framework.

BARRIERS TO THE PROJECT

While further delay of a project that has already been postponed once and rejected by voters four consecutive times may seem counterintuitive—especially given the clear need for facility improvements—it should be viewed as a strong signal that the public sees fundamental flaws in the proposal as currently presented. Rather than rushing ahead with a plan that lacks broad support, a strategic pause would create space to address several persistent challenges. These include reexamining governance structures, reassessing space utilization across the district, restoring public trust, and conducting a more comprehensive comparison of alternative solutions. It would also allow time for key demographic, economic, and political uncertainties to play out, helping to ensure that long-term decisions are grounded in a clearer understanding of future conditions.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND ENROLLMENT TRENDS

Department of Education rules for school funding require that elementary schools be constructed to accommodate 90-100% of the enrollment forecast. According to the NESDEC forecast from November 2024, the high-water mark for grades 1 through 5 will be 745 in 2029. With this forecast, a design capacity of between 745 and 828 would be justified. However, the long-term accuracy of this forecast must be scrutinized.

Housing

Demographic trends across New Hampshire—and New England more broadly—do not support assumptions of significant long-term enrollment growth. Birth rates have declined steadily over the past two decades, with New Hampshire consistently ranking among the lowest in the nation. While some communities have seen modest increases in student populations due to in-migration, these gains are often offset by aging populations, limited housing stock, and a lack of affordable options for young families. Immigration has not occurred at a scale that would meaningfully reverse these patterns, particularly in suburban and rural areas. In fact, most of the state's growth has been concentrated in specific corridors and urban centers, leaving many school districts facing flat or declining enrollments. Amherst is not immune to these trends. Without major changes to zoning, housing policy, or regional economic dynamics, it is difficult to justify long term capital investments based on projections that are unlikely to materialize. Planning should be grounded in actual demographic data, not aspirational forecasts.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, New Hampshire is the second-oldest state in the nation, with a median age of 43.1—trailing only Maine, which has a median age of 45. Amherst's population skews even older, with a median age of 45.6 and approximately 19% of residents over the age of 65. As the population continues to age, housing turnover may slow, particularly if older residents choose to age in place rather than downsize or relocate. This trend can have a dampening effect on the availability of family-sized homes entering the market, potentially limiting opportunities for younger families to move into the community and impacting future school enrollment.

When examining enrollment trends, it's essential to base projections on actual local data rather than aspirational forecasts. In Amherst, housing turnover has historically had a measurable—though often overstated—impact on school enrollment. Using state-established multipliers—0.4 students per single-family home and 0.06 per non-single-family unit, with approximately 74% of annual sales classified as single-family—we can estimate the number of students potentially added each year due to home sales. Though these estimates are

HOUSING	
Total HU (Housing Units)	4,549 (100%)
Owner Occupied HU	4,037 (88.7%)
Renter Occupied HU	374 (8.2%)
Vacant Housing Units	138 (3.0%)
Median Home Value	$580,869
Average Home Value	$599,876
Housing Affordability Index	99
HOUSEHOLDS	
Total Households	4,411
Average Household Size	2.72
Family Households	3,517
Average Family Size	3

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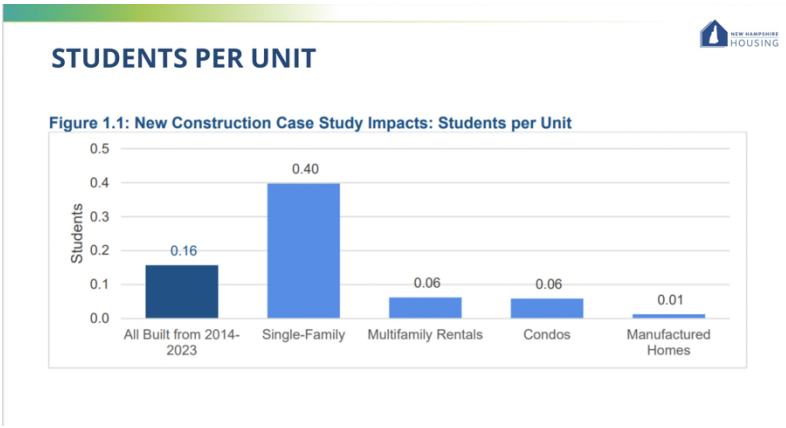


This table illustrates the average number of school-age children generated by different types of housing units—a figure that can vary slightly by community and the age of the home. It's important to note that new enrollment tied to home sales is typically spread across all grade levels, rather than concentrated in one area such as kindergarten. This means spikes in home sales may increase overall enrollment but won't necessarily lead to immediate pressure on any single grade.

typical for new construction, it should be noted that sales of existing homes may have slightly different ratios of children per unit sold.

From 2014 to 2021, Amherst experienced a sustained period of strong real estate activity, peaking in 2020 with 298 home sales. This translated into an estimated 94 students entering the district due to housing turnover that year. Since then, however, home sales have declined sharply—dropping to just 170 in 2024—bringing the estimated student yield down to around 53. That's a 43% reduction in potential new students in just four years, with no clear indication that sales will rebound to previous highs in the near term The likelihood of a near-term rebound in home sales appears slim, as the market is constrained by multiple structural factors. Inventory remains extremely low, in part due to persistently high interest rates, elevated home prices, and the burden of rising property taxes—all of which discourage both downsizing and relocation. Additionally, Amherst has already seen significant turnover since the 2009 recession, with 3,280 sales representing 2,418 unique properties out of a total housing inventory of about 4,559 households. This means that over half the town's housing stock has changed hands in the past 15 years, further limiting the pool of likely sellers in the short term. With few homes on the market and affordability at a multi-year low, enrollment tied to housing turnover is unlikely to see meaningful growth without a significant shift in either market conditions or housing policy.

Birth Rate

Birth data paints a similar picture. After a low of 68 births in 2014, the number fluctuated over the decade, hitting a brief high of 106 in 2022 before falling again to 79 in 2024. This pattern suggests a relatively flat or declining early-grade pipeline, which holds greater weight for long-term planning than year-to-year fluctuations might suggest.

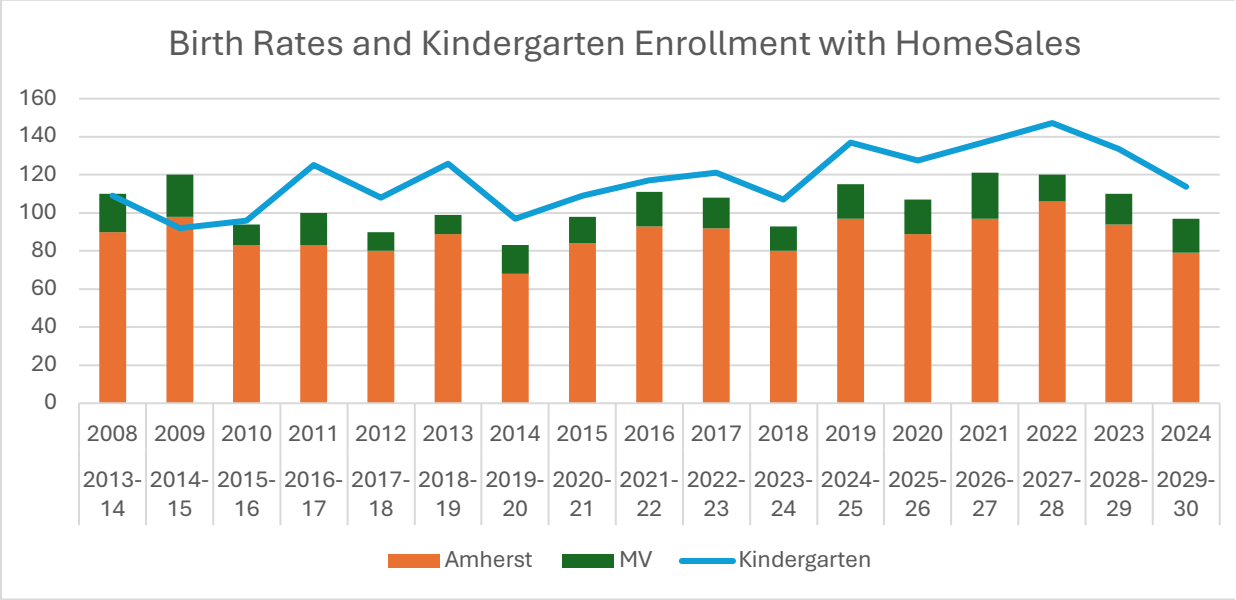
Year	Home Sales	Estimated Students (from Sales)	Births
2014	158	49.2328	68
2015	236	73.5376	84
2016	253	78.8348	93
2017	268	83.5088	92
2018	249	77.5884	80
2019	250	77.9	97
2020	298	92.8568	89
2021	280	87.248	97
2022	220	68.552	106
2023	185	57.646	94
2024	170	52.972	76

This table tracks monthly home sales over the past 17+ years, revealing both seasonal trends and long-term shifts in the local housing market. Home sales typically peak in late spring and summer, with May, June, and July consistently showing the highest activity. Notably, sales surged in 2020 and 2021—coinciding with pandemic-era relocations—before tapering off in 2023 and 2024. These patterns and their relationship to the local birth rate are key to understanding demographic pressures and future school enrollment, particularly given Amherst's aging population and declining birth rates.

It's important to note, however, that births represent an upcoming cohort of students that generally enters the school system at the same time, primarily at kindergarten. In contrast, students brought in through housing turnover are typically distributed across multiple grade levels, often replacing students who have aged out or moved on. As a result, the immediate enrollment impact of real estate activity is usually far more diffuse than birth data would suggest.

Taken together, these trends do not support assumptions of sustained or significant enrollment growth. Without major shifts in zoning policy, regional economic change, or large-scale housing development, Amherst appears to be settling into a pattern of stable or modestly declining school-age population. Capital planning and resource allocation should reflect this reality.

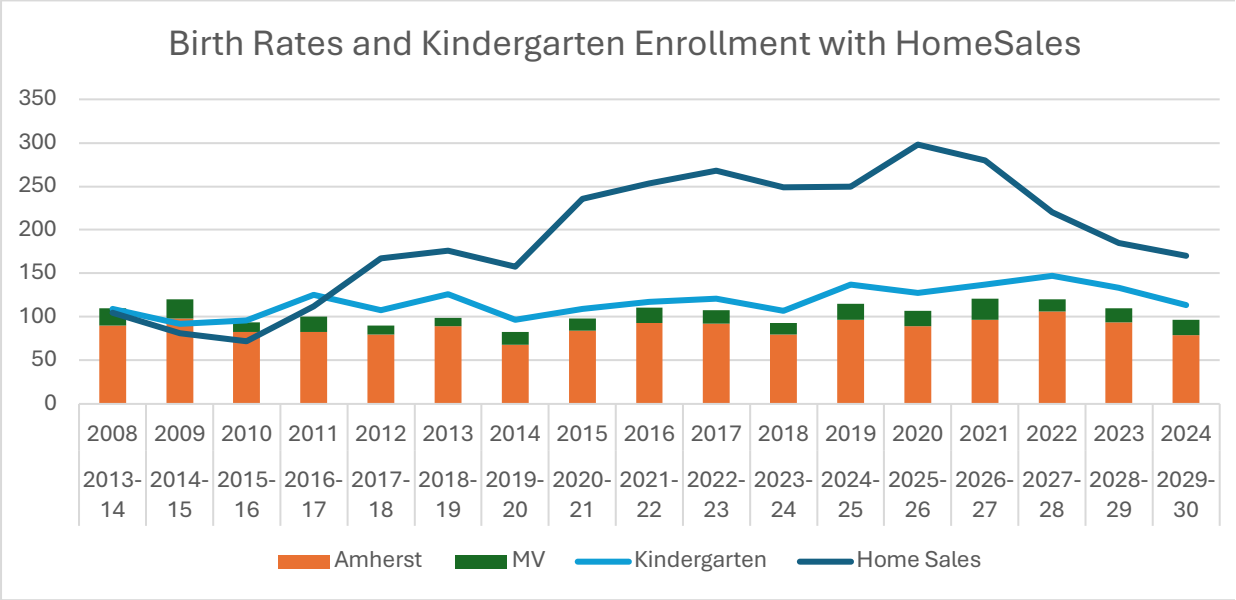
Style	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Grand Total
2 Unit		1		1			1			3	2	1	1	3				13
3 Unit	1											1						2
Antique					10	9	7	10	8	13	15	11	22	16	11	6	6	144
Apartments					1													1
Bungalow	1				1	1		1		1			1		1			7
Cape Cod	22	14	13	23	19	14	22	30	33	32	18	35	43	32	26	21	23	420
Colonial	55	47	42	57	65	80	56	112	107	100	92	104	111	129	86	67	65	1375
Condominium					31	35	31	43	56	73	70	61	71	47	38	41	38	635
Conventional				1		1	5	1	4	6	4	2	4	4	4	5	3	44
Convert Camp					3	3	4	2	4	5	3	1	3	3	6	8	4	49
Manuf Housing DW										1							1	2
Manuf Housing SW		1			1		1						2	1			2	8
Mobile Hm Dbl wd	2		1	2	1		1	2	2		3		2	1	3	1		21
Mobile Home		1		2	2		2	1	1	2			2	1	2		1	17
Modern/Contemp	3	4	5	10	11	9	7	9	8	6	9	7	19	15	7	9	8	146
Raised Ranch	3	3	3	2	1	3	1	5	10	5	6	9	1	6	7	1	3	69
Ranch	12	8	6	10	10	18	17	17	17	19	18	11	10	18	15	8	8	222
Res Apt															1			1
Split-Level	3	2	1	2	7	2	1	2	1	1	4	4	1	1	5	3		40
Vacant Land	3		1	2	4	1	2	1	2	1	5	3	5	3	8	15	8	64
Grand Total	105	81	72	112	167	176	158	236	253	268	249	250	298	280	220	185	170	3280



This chart highlights the strong correlation between local birth rates and kindergarten enrollment five years later. As birth numbers rise or fall, kindergarten enrollment tends to follow suit with a consistent lag, providing a reliable early indicator of future school enrollment trends. Understanding this relationship helps districts anticipate incoming class sizes and plan proactively for staffing, space, and resource needs.

Interplay Between Home Sales and Birth Rates

While kindergarten enrollment closely tracks local birth rates, the data also suggest that home sales may influence those birth rates, particularly in suburban communities like Amherst. When single-family homes are purchased, they are often acquired by young families or couples



This chart illustrates a clear correlation between spikes in home sales and subsequent increases in birth rates, suggesting that families moving into town often do so before or during the early stages of starting a family. However, the relationship between home sales and kindergarten enrollment is more diffuse. That's because new residents don't all arrive with preschool-aged children—many enroll students across a range of grade levels. As a result, while housing turnover drives long-term enrollment trends, it does not produce a one-to-one increase in kindergarten enrollment. Recognizing this distinction is key to interpreting demographic data and planning for future school capacity needs

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planning to start a family shortly after settling in. This dynamic means that increases in home sales tend to precede corresponding rises in birth rates, as was saw between 2014 and 2016. Conversely, the sharp drop in home sales after 2021 correlates with a notable decline in births beginning in 2023. This relationship highlights the value of viewing real estate activity as a leading indicator of future enrollment patterns. Declining home sales not only reduce short-term student inflow through housing turnover but may also signal a longer-term dip in local births, compounding the enrollment challenge. For planning purposes, it is critical to track both home sales and birth trends in tandem, as together they provide a more complete picture of the district's demographic trajectory.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Allow Time to Evaluate Enrollment Pressures

Public education in New Hampshire is being squeezed from all sides. The convergence of political mandates, shifting cultural attitudes, rising competition from alternative education models, and mounting property tax pressures has created a volatile and uncertain environment for long-term planning. Policies expanding voucher programs and "district choice" threaten to siphon students and funding from local schools, while costly unfunded mandates continue to erode budgets. At the same time, a growing array of charter schools, virtual platforms, and private institutions are offering families more alternatives than ever before—many with fewer regulatory burdens. Compounding these challenges, recent state-level tax cuts and the ongoing downshifting of financial responsibility have left municipalities with little choice but to raise local property taxes to meet baseline educational obligations. In this climate, any major capital

investment must be weighed not only against enrollment projections, but also against the shifting political and economic landscape that will shape the future of public education itself.

Rebuild Trust
Some also argue that continued delays send a message of indecision. However, in this case, concerns about community trust and engagement must be understood in the context of past missteps as outlined earlier. These experiences have left many in the community skeptical of the board's transparency and financial stewardship. For this reason, it is difficult to claim that proceeding with the current plan would build trust. In fact, it may do the opposite if the public feels they were not meaningfully included in the process.

Economic Equilibrium
On the other hand, arguments in favor of delay include the opportunity to allow inflation to settle and interest rates to potentially decline. Inflation has outpaced wage growth for many families, and postponing the project could give household incomes time to better align with the rising cost of living—making future tax impacts more manageable. Additionally, waiting could provide time for a more inclusive public process and greater financial clarity, reducing the risk of underestimating actual construction costs in a volatile market.

Ultimately, the decision to move forward or delay involves weighing the potential for higher costs against the very real need to rebuild public confidence and ensure that future investments are grounded in both fiscal responsibility and authentic community engagement.

Opportunity to Reconfigure the Governance Structure of the Districts
The reconfiguration committee ultimately concluded that the timing was not right for the types of structural changes they were asked to consider and deferred any action. Instead, they recommended being watchful for future opportunities to realign the governance of the districts. While just one aspect of a broader challenge, going forward with the project would be a missed opportunity to reconsider how the districts are organized and governed. If the current project proceeds and Wilkins is rebuilt as a 120,000 square foot elementary school designed to serve over 860 students, it will effectively cement the status quo for the foreseeable future—locking in the current governance model and limiting the flexibility to pursue more integrated or streamlined alternatives down the road.

School Specialization
A trend that began with young athletes specializing in a single sport at an early age is now playing out in education as well. In New Hampshire, there has long been a tradition of exceptional students attending elite preparatory schools such as St. Paul's and Phillips Exeter. However, the rise of charter schools has expanded the range of options for academic specialization. Amherst, centrally located, is within a short commute to several such schools, including the Academy for Science and Design for students with a strong focus on STEM, and the Gate City Charter School for the Arts for those inclined toward the creative disciplines. The result of these alternatives is to drain top academic performers from local schools, creating a kind of educational brain drain—while also reducing access to athletics and extracurriculars for the broader student body as participation numbers decline and resources follow the enrollment.

Increasingly, students are also combining athletic and academic specialization. For example, Cyclones Academy in Hudson, NH, allows student-athletes to pursue hockey full time while completing their education online through the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School. This

model appeals to families seeking flexible, tailored pathways that align with both academic goals and extracurricular passions.

Private Schools, Religious Schools, Charter Schools, Home School, and Alternative Platforms

In addition to program specialization and brick-and-mortar private schools, school choice is giving rise to a rapidly expanding landscape of alternative educational platforms. At present, there are at least 18 private, religious, or charter school options within a reasonable commuting distance of Amherst. These institutions offer a wide range of pedagogical approaches, from classical preparatory to Montessori and Waldorf-inspired models. Beyond physical schools, there are at least 15 online or hybrid learning platforms that provide either partial or comprehensive educational programs for students of all ages. Homeschooling also remains a viable and increasingly popular option, often blending parent-led instruction with virtual curricula or microschool-style learning pods. Taken together, these alternatives represent a significant and growing shift in how families approach education—and they are increasingly drawing students away from traditional public-school systems.

	Name	Location	Type
1	Cyclones Academy	Hybrid - Hockey/Online via V	6–12
2	Seacoast Performance Academy	Hybrid - Hockey/Online via V	6–12
3	Bishop Guertin High School	Nashua, NH	Private - Catholic, 9–12
4	Trinity High School	Manchester, NH	Private - Catholic, 9–12
5	Bishop Brady High School	Concord, NH	Private - Catholic, 9–12
6	The Derryfield School	Manchester, NH	Private - Independent, 6–12
7	High Mowing School	Wilton, NH	Private - Waldorf, Preschool–12
8	Pine Hill Waldorf School	Wilton, NH	Private - Waldorf, Preschool–8
9	Lawrence Academy	Groton, MA	Private - Boarding/Day, 9–12
10	Phillips Exeter Academy	Exeter, NH	Private - Boarding, 9–12
11	St. Paul's School	Concord, NH	Private - Boarding, 9–12
12	Tilton School	Tilton, NH	Private - Boarding/Day, 9–Postgrad
13	New Hampton School	New Hampton, NH	Private - Boarding/Day, 9–Postgrad
14	Country Village Montessori School	Amherst, NH	Private - Montessori, Preschool–5
15	Hollis Monessori School	Hollis, NH	Private - Montessori, Preschool–9
16	Academy for Science and Design	Nashua, NH	Charter - STEM, 6–12
17	Gate City Charter School for the Arts	Merrimack, NH	Charter - Arts Integrated, K–8
18	Wellheart Charter School	Milford, NH	Charter - Integrated, K–8

	Platform	Type	Grade Levels	Website
1	VLACS (Virtual Learning Academy Charter School)	Public Charter	K–12	https://vlacs.org/
2	K12 (Stride, Inc.)	Public/Private Options	K–12	https://www.k12.com/
3	Connections Academy	Public Charter	K–12	https://www.connectionsacademy.com/
4	Edgenuity (Imagine Learning)	Private/School Partnership	6–12	https://www.imaginelearning.com/programs/virtual-school-services
5	NorthStar Academy	Private Christian	4–12	https://www.northstar-academy.org/
6	Laurel Springs School	Private	K–12	https://laurelsprings.com/
7	The Keystone School	Private	K–12	https://www.keystoneschoolonline.com/
8	Time4Learning	Private/Homeschool	PreK–12	https://www.time4learning.com/
9	Outschool	Private/Enrichment	K–12	https://outschool.com/
10	Khan Academy	Free/Nonprofit	K–12 (Self-paced)	https://www.khanacademy.org/
11	Coursera (for Teens)	Private/College-level	Advanced High School	https://www.coursera.org/collections/teen-learning
12	Cyclones Academy	Hybrid - Hockey/Online via VLACS	6–12	https://www.northerncyclones.com/page/show/6511367-cyclones-academy
13	Seacoast Performance Academy	Hybrid - Hockey/Online via VLACS	6–12	https://www.seacoastperformanceacademy.com/
14	Penn Foster High School	Private - Self-paced Online	9–12	https://www.pennfoster.edu/high-school
15	Prenda Microschools	Hybrid - Microschool/Online	K–8	https://www.prenda.com/

Political Pressures from National and State Legislation

The climate for public education has grown increasingly adversarial in recent years, marked by a steady stream of legislation from both Washington and Concord that places new and often burdensome obligations on public schools. Much of this legislation appears deliberately crafted to weaken public education in favor of alternatives like homeschooling, charter schools, and private or religious institutions. The regulatory disparity is stark: public school teachers must hold active certifications, while many private schools are not required to employ certified educators. Moreover, private institutions are not obligated to accept students with disabilities, develop individualized education plans (IEPs), or participate in statewide standardized testing—requirements that public schools must meet regardless of resources or capacity.

One of the most chilling developments has been the introduction of so-called "divisive concepts" laws, which create a legal minefield for educators when addressing topics related to race, gender, or systemic inequality. In New Hampshire, this legislation—originally embedded in the state budget—has had a chilling effect on classroom discourse and teacher morale. Although a federal court recently ruled portions of the law unconstitutional, the decision is expected to be appealed, and the statute remains technically in effect. Regardless of the legal outcome, the damage to trust between educators and lawmakers is real and ongoing. Teachers now navigate their responsibilities under the looming threat of personal liability, vague statutory language, and politically motivated complaints—all of which erode the stability of the public education system.

More recently, New Hampshire has seen a wave of legislation targeting how public schools handle sensitive topics, particularly around gender identity and student privacy. One of the most alarming examples is HB-10, often referred to as a "parental bill of rights." While framed as a transparency measure, the bill includes provisions that would require school staff to disclose to parents any indication that a student is exploring issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity—even in cases where doing so could jeopardize the student's safety or well-being. Failure to comply could expose educators and districts to legal and professional consequences.

Supporters claim HB-10 is about restoring parental control, but opponents, including civil rights organizations and mental health professionals, warn that it effectively forces teachers into roles that violate student trust and risk worsening already fragile mental health outcomes—particularly for LGBTQ+ youth. The bill passed the House in 2023 but encountered pushback in the Senate. Revised versions continue to circulate, and similar proposals are now being introduced as standalone mandates, raising the possibility that key provisions could be enacted piecemeal or embedded in future budget bills.

Combined with existing restrictions like the "divisive concepts" law, HB-10 contributes to a broader atmosphere of surveillance and politicization in public education—where educators are caught between professional ethics, state mandates, and deeply personal student experiences. It is yet another reminder that the current legislative trajectory is not merely about school funding or curriculum; it is about control, compliance, and coercion. And it is public schools, once again, that are left holding the burden of implementation and liability.

In addition to HB-10, the New Hampshire Legislature has introduced several other bills targeting transgender students, special education services, and the structure of school administration and funding. These proposals range from restricting access to gender-affirming resources and facilities, to curbing protections under special education law, to expanding voucher programs that divert public funds toward private alternatives. Collectively, these efforts reflect a broader pattern of legislative intervention aimed at reshaping public education—not through support or investment, but through restriction, deregulation, and ideological pressure that disproportionately burdens already vulnerable students and the professionals who serve them. What was once a slow undercurrent of policy pressure has evolved into a coordinated ideological campaign. Public schools are now being asked to do more with less—while operating under heightened scrutiny, escalating mandates, and a level of hostility that private and homeschool environments are rarely forced to confront.

Voucher Programs Discourage Enrollment
The Educational Freedom Account (EFA) program, launched in the 2021–22 school year, allows families to redirect state per-pupil funding toward private, parochial, home-based, or virtual education options. During its initial rollout, local districts received temporary "stabilization grants" to offset the financial impact of losing students to the program. However, those grants were short-lived, and as they phase out, districts are left to absorb the fixed operational costs of educating a smaller—and increasingly unpredictable—student population. Current legislation, including HB-1665 and HB-1634, seeks to significantly expand the program by eliminating income eligibility limits altogether. If passed, these bills would open the program to wealthier families, further accelerating public school enrollment decline while continuing to divert state education dollars away from local districts—without providing corresponding relief for the infrastructure and staffing costs those districts still bear.

District Choice legislation
The recent passage of HB-741 by the New Hampshire House introduces new considerations that warrant caution before moving forward with large-scale construction. If enacted, the bill would allow students to enroll in public schools outside of their home districts—at no additional cost to families—based on available capacity. This raises the very real possibility that underutilized space in Amherst schools, particularly at the high school level, could be designated by the Department of Education as available for cross-district enrollment. Until the details of the implementation are clarified, moving forward with a costly new elementary school—particularly when existing space in the district may be reallocated to address local needs—risks ceding flexibility and control to state-level mandates. A more prudent approach may be to delay construction and re-examine internal capacity options, including repurposing underutilized high school space to support elementary programming, before inviting potentially irreversible commitments.

Pressure from Private Organizations Profiting from Public Education Funds
With public money increasingly available for private education, concerns about rent-seeking, profiteering, and corruption continue to grow. For example, when Croydon's public-school budget was cut in half in 2022, the private micro-school operator Prenda was positioned to step in and replace the defunded public system—raising serious alarms about the potential misuse of public funds and the erosion of democratic local control. Although that effort was ultimately overturned by an overwhelming vote at a town meeting, the underlying agenda has since resurfaced at the state level. Proposed legislation such as HB-1595 and HB-1677 would impose state-mandated caps on local education tax increases, effectively achieving through statute what Croydon was unable to do through direct democracy. These proposals threaten to limit a community's ability to invest in its public schools, even when local voters are willing to raise revenue to support their students.

Current Federal Pressures
Public schools are also facing growing uncertainty at the federal level. A mercurial national political climate has introduced heightened instability into long-term education planning, particularly as prominent political figures and candidates continue to call for the downsizing—or even outright elimination—of the U.S. Department of Education. While such proposals are unlikely to be enacted immediately, their presence in mainstream discourse contributes to an atmosphere of unpredictability. Compounding this is the precarious nature of federal grant funding, including essential support streams such as Title I, which provides critical assistance to schools serving low-income populations. Many public-school programs depend on these grants

not just to support at-risk students, but to maintain baseline staffing, intervention, and support services. As federal priorities shift, local districts are left to absorb the risk, often without adequate warning or a sustainable backup plan. This dynamic makes long-range planning difficult and leaves schools increasingly exposed to policy changes that are driven more by ideology than by educational evidence or community need.

DOWNSHIFTING OF COSTS TO LOCAL PROPERTY TAXES

New Hampshire's heavy reliance on local property taxes to fund education places a disproportionate burden on homeowners—particularly seniors, families on fixed incomes, and residents without children in the school system. As Andru Volinsky and others have pointed out, property tax is the one most likely to force people from their homes—not because they oppose public service and education, but because they simply cannot absorb unchecked increases. This is true even in relatively affluent communities like Amherst and Mont Vernon, where rising assessments can outpace household income growth and strain the budgets of longtime residents. In this context, opposition to the Wilkins project should not be dismissed as reflexive negativity or ideological resistance. Many in the community are willing to invest in education—but only when they are confident that the plan reflects sound fiscal judgment, transparency, and a fair evaluation of alternatives.

At the same time, we must recognize that every increase to the local tax burden comes with real, often irreversible consequences. We never know which dollar will be the one that breaks the camel's back. The next uptick in the mill rate could be what drives a longtime resident from their home. These are not abstract concerns—they are deeply personal and demand thoughtful, compassionate governance. When faced with serious and necessary obligations, it may not always be possible to avoid increasing the tax burden. But when that happens, it must be done as judiciously as possible, with full transparency, community input, and a clear justification that demonstrates why this is the best possible use of public funds. For any major project to succeed, it must deliver more than a compelling vision; it must also offer a defensible return on investment for students, taxpayers, and the broader community.

These local concerns cannot be fully understood without recognizing the broader financial context in which they exist. One of the most persistent threats to the long-term stability of public education in New Hampshire is the sustained trend of downshifting state responsibilities onto local property taxpayers. While this pattern affects a wide range of essential services—from public safety to infrastructure and health—it has been especially acute in the area of school funding which can account for more than 75% of local expenditures. Over time, the state has steadily reduced its financial commitments to public education, forcing local districts to shoulder an increasing share of the costs of delivering a constitutionally adequate education. The Wilkins Project must be viewed through this lens—not as an isolated challenge, but as part of a much larger and ongoing shift in fiscal responsibility.

Funding an Adequate Education

This fiscal burden is compounded by the state's failure to meet its constitutional obligation to fund public education as defined in the landmark Claremont decisions. In those rulings, the New Hampshire Supreme Court affirmed that it is the state's responsibility—not local communities'—to fund an adequate education. However, since the establishment of "adequacy aid," the base

amount has grown at an anemic pace—just 1.2% per year since 2004—while inflation has averaged more than 3% annually. By FY 2026, adequacy aid is expected to reach $4,265.64 per pupil. If that amount had merely kept pace with inflation since 2004, it would be pupil over $5,840 per.

Year	Adequacy Grant	Annual % Change
2004	$3,390.00	
2005	$3,450.00	1.77%
2008	$3,450.00	0.00%
2009	$3,450.00	0.00%
2010	$3,450.00	0.00%
2011	$3,450.00	0.00%
2012	$3,450.00	0.00%
2013	$3,450.00	0.00%
2014	$3,498.30	1.40%
2015	$3,498.30	0.00%
2016	$3,561.27	1.80%
2017	$3,561.27	0.00%
2018	$3,636.06	2.10%
2019	$3,636.06	0.00%
2020	$3,708.78	2.00%
2021	$3,708.78	0.00%
2022	$3,786.66	2.10%
2023	$3,786.66	0.00%
2024	$4,100.00	8.27%
2025	$4,182.00	2.00%
2026	$4,265.64	2.00%
	Total % Change	25.83%

The disconnect between what the state defines as adequate and the real cost of educating students was at the heart of the ConVal lawsuit, in which a superior court judge ruled in 2023 that the state's current base adequacy amount is unconstitutionally low. The court concluded that the actual cost of delivering a constitutionally adequate education is at least $7,356 per student, excluding transportation, food service, and building maintenance—figures far above what the state currently provides. While the ruling has been appealed, it underscores a glaring gap between the state's funding formula and the true cost of public education in New Hampshire.

School Building Aid

Another critical area where the state has failed to uphold its fiscal obligations is school building aid—a program designed to help districts cover the cost of constructing or renovating school facilities, addressing safety, compliance, and modernization needs. Historically, the state reimbursed 30–60% of eligible project costs, depending on a district's property wealth and financial capacity, with funds paid out incrementally over 20 years through "tail payments." However, in 2011, the state suspended new approvals for building aid, focusing exclusively on tail payments for previously approved projects. Although new aid applications were reinstated in 2019, the program now operates under a strict $50 million annual cap, which includes both new projects and remaining tail payments. This cap severely limits how many new school construction projects can be approved in any given year.

Because a substantial portion of the annual allocation is tied up in tail payments, the backlog for funding has grown significantly. Districts must now compete for limited funds through a ranked application process, with priority given to projects that address urgent safety risks, code violations, or severe facility deficiencies. Additional weight is given to districts with higher levels of economic disadvantage, often measured by the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. This places communities like Amherst—where the percentage of economically disadvantaged students is comparatively low—at a distinct disadvantage, even if the project is urgent from a capacity or educational standpoint.

As a result, towns like Amherst, which are trying to plan proactively rather than respond to crisis, often fail to score competitively enough to qualify for aid. The system creates a bottleneck effect that disproportionately impacts districts that fall in the middle: not wealthy enough to absorb major construction costs easily, but not disadvantaged enough to rank at the top of the priority list. Meanwhile, aging facilities continue to deteriorate, and the cost of deferred maintenance continues to rise. Despite the urgent needs of many districts across the state, New Hampshire's building aid program remains chronically underfunded and structurally constrained—pushing yet another essential component of public education onto the backs of local taxpayers.

Special Education Funding
Special education is one of the most complex and rapidly growing areas of educational spending in New Hampshire, and it remains chronically underfunded at both the state and federal levels. The state provides partial reimbursement for high-cost students through Special Education Aid (formerly Catastrophic Aid), offering up to 80% reimbursement for costs exceeding 3.5 times the state average per-pupil cost and 100% for costs exceeding 10 times. However, this aid is consistently underfunded, meaning districts often receive only a fraction of what they are legally eligible for—forcing local taxpayers to fill the gap. Meanwhile, the federal government's obligation under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to fund 40% of additional special education costs has never been fulfilled, with actual funding levels hovering around 14–16%. As a result, school districts are legally required to meet student needs regardless of cost but must do so with inadequate state and federal support. This disproportionately impacts small and rural districts, where even a single high-cost placement can destabilize a budget. Larger districts, while somewhat more resilient, also struggle to meet growing demand fueled by rising diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and other high-acuity conditions. The inequity is further compounded by New Hampshire's reliance on local property taxes to fund special education, creating stark disparities in services between wealthier and lower-income communities. The current funding system effectively punishes districts for complying with federal mandates, undermining both equity and fiscal stability across the state.

New Hampshire Retirement System
An example of the State of New Hampshire's downshifting beyond education, is the complete withdrawal from its share of contributions to the New Hampshire Retirement System (NHRS)—a shift that began during the 2008–2009 financial crisis and culminated in 2011. At its inception in 1967, the state covered 35% of employer contributions for teachers, police, and firefighters. That figure dropped to 30% in 2009, 25% in 2010, and was fully eliminated in 2011. Since then, municipalities and school districts have borne 100% of these costs—dramatically increasing pressure on local budgets and property taxpayers.

In recent years, the legislature approved a partial restoration of a 7.5% state contribution, but only for Group II employees (police and fire). This relief, however, was temporary and subject to reauthorization, making it an unstable and incomplete fix. Group I employees—including teachers—remain entirely unfunded by the state, despite bipartisan calls to address what is widely viewed as an unfunded mandate. Until a permanent solution is enacted, local governments will continue to shoulder rising retirement obligations with no clear mechanism for long-term relief.

Other Reductions in Financial Support
In addition to education and retirement funding, the State of New Hampshire has also reduced its financial support for a range of critical municipal services. Highway Block Grants—once a dependable source of road maintenance funding—have stagnated despite increasing material and labor costs, forcing towns to defer basic infrastructure upkeep. The State Bridge Aid program, which traditionally covered 80% of the cost of eligible municipal bridge projects, now faces backlogs and long wait times, delaying necessary repairs and upgrades. Similarly, funding for water and wastewater projects has diminished, shifting the burden of compliance with environmental regulations onto local taxpayers. Together, these reductions reflect a broader trend of downshifting that places growing fiscal pressure on municipalities and intensifies the stakes of every local decision.

SUMMARY

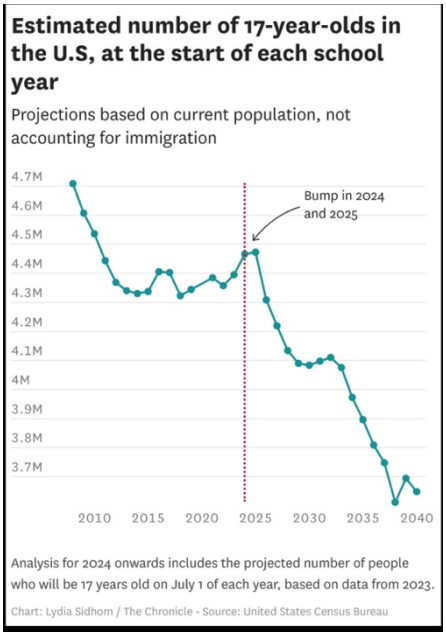
The Wilkins Project, though well-intentioned, has unfolded under a series of structural, political, and demographic pressures that merit closer scrutiny. Despite multiple redesigns and cost reductions, it continues to fall short at the ballot box—largely because it fails to address persistent community skepticism, long-range demographic trends, and the full array of available options. Enrollment across the district has stabilized or declined, housing turnover has slowed significantly, and birth rates—after a brief uptick—are once again falling. At the same time, valuable space in existing facilities, particularly at Souhegan, remains underutilized. These factors suggest a need to rethink—not abandon—our approach to solving elementary capacity constraints.

A promising and underexplored alternative is the relocation of grades seven and eight to the Souhegan campus. While maintaining a distinct junior high identity, this move would ease pressure on the elementary schools and strengthen programming at the upper levels through shared staffing, cross-certification, and continuity in subjects like world languages and STEM. It would also create operational and strategic advantages: buying time for economic and political volatility to settle, avoiding forced participation in open-district placement under HB-741, and preserving long-term flexibility by keeping current properties under district control. The town could repurpose vacated school buildings for civic use without permanently surrendering them.

This plan also addresses the erosion of academic scale at Souhegan, where stagnating enrollment has made it difficult to maintain both rigorous core offerings and a broad range of electives. With fewer students to support existing programs, some courses face reductions or elimination. While smaller school size is often seen as a virtue, research and experience consistently show that larger high schools, especially high performing schools like Souhegan, are better positioned to offer diverse academic and extracurricular opportunities. Relocating grades seven and eight would help reverse this trend—providing staffing flexibility through shared certifications, enhancing vertical alignment, and making more effective use of faculty expertise.

While some may prefer a traditional middle school model, doing so could limit these advantages. A well-structured junior high—integrated but distinct—could offer the best of both worlds: developmental appropriateness and expanded programming. As the district considers its long-term future, these educational and operational benefits should be central to the conversation. The path forward is not about doing less—it's about planning smarter, with transparency, flexibility, and an honest accounting of the challenges ahead.

Districts across the U.S. and Canada are increasingly consolidating grades 7–12 under a single roof to adapt to declining enrollment and excess facility capacity. This approach has been embraced not only for its operational efficiency but also for the academic continuity it provides across secondary grade levels. In Massachusetts, the Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools are planning to shift all 7–12 students into a shared high school campus to address chronic budget shortfalls and declining enrollment, projecting over $2 million in savings through staffing and operational efficiencies. Similarly, in North Carolina's Madison County, district leaders proposed moving seventh and eighth graders to the high school to cut costs without compromising quality. In Canada, especially in rural regions, the 7–12 model is a common response to demographic decline, helping schools maintain program breadth and staffing flexibility. Locally, examples like Bedford High School and Middle School in New Hampshire, as well as Lawrence and Winslow high schools in Maine, demonstrate the feasibility and long-term viability of co-locating middle and high school students on shared campuses. These models illustrate how strategic consolidation can enhance educational delivery while making more efficient use of taxpayer-funded infrastructure.



Reflecting on the Process—Not Second-Guessing It

Some of the observations and analysis presented in this report may understandably come across as second-guessing the work of the JFAC, particularly given the time, effort, and volunteer energy poured into that process. To be clear, the intent is not to dismiss or undermine that work, nor to engage in retroactive fault-finding or armchair quarterbacking. Rather, the goal is to recognize that delays—while frustrating—have had the unintended benefit of allowing new trends and inconsistencies to come into clearer view.

In the years since JFAC began its work, several underlying assumptions have shifted or become more transparent. For instance, while birth rates did rise modestly during the 2019–2022 period due to high housing turnover, the broader trend since then has been stagnant or declining—a trajectory that closely aligns with the projections issued by the 2015–16 Streamline Committee, rather than the more optimistic forecasts used during the JFAC process.

There are also legitimate questions to raise about how data was selectively applied across different components of the plan. The Souhegan 2.0 proposal, for example, justified reducing instructional space at the high school on the basis of stagnant or declining enrollment—while the Wilkins project relied on forecasted growth to justify adding significant classroom capacity. While differences in grade-level timing account for some of that discrepancy, it remains unclear whether the two plans were developed in full coordination or if they reflected parallel but disconnected assumptions. If a surge in enrollment were to reach the high school, would the proposed reductions have been reversible—or would they have locked the district into a new round of expansion?

These are not criticisms of intent, but important reflections on process. With the benefit of hindsight, the community has an opportunity to pause, reassess, and ensure that any future path is grounded in updated data, structural alignment, and long-term flexibility.

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CONCLUSION

This analysis is not intended to prescribe a definitive course of action, but rather to revisit an underexplored concept that may warrant renewed attention. The ideas presented here should be viewed as a starting point for broader community dialogue and professional analysis—not as a finalized recommendation or blueprint.

In sum, these recommendations present a strategic opportunity to meet the district's evolving facility needs while reinforcing public confidence in the process. Addressing space constraints and long-deferred maintenance is essential, but doing so in a measured, transparent way allows for smarter investment and stronger long-term outcomes. A pause now enables deeper analysis, broader engagement, and the flexibility to adjust as enrollment, funding, and community needs continue to shift. It also reduces the risk of costly missteps or rushed decisions that could undermine both educational quality and fiscal stability. At a time when trust in public institutions is fragile and future conditions are uncertain, pursuing a thoughtful, adaptable course is not only prudent—it is essential to the district's success

At worst, consolidating seventh and eighth grades at the Souhegan campus offers the district a temporary reprieve—an opportunity to address deferred maintenance, stabilize governance, and modernize aging facilities without prematurely committing to a large, inflexible investment. At best, it positions the district for long-term success by aligning academic programming, leveraging underutilized space, and buffering against future political, fiscal, and demographic uncertainty.

Regardless of where one stands, the concept is grounded in adaptability, strategic use of existing resources, and a thoughtful response to complex challenges. In a climate marked by fiscal constraints and voter hesitation, this may not only be a viable alternative—it may prove the most responsible path to consider.

APPENDIX A

UTILIZATION ANALYSIS

Expressing the true utilization rate of the Souhegan High School campus is not entirely straightforward. The calculation depends on which assumptions are used regarding both capacity and enrollment. If classroom capacity is limited to 20 students and certain potential instructional spaces are excluded, the estimated educational capacity is approximately 1,100 students. However, if capacity is based on 32 square feet per student and includes a broader range of usable spaces, the capacity rises to 1,300 or more.

On the enrollment side, the total number of students enrolled at Souhegan for the 2024–25 academic year is 702. However, if we look at the number of students actually enrolled in classes during any given period, as shown in the master schedule, that number fluctuates between 587 and 647.

Accordingly, the highest utilization rate—based on a total enrollment of 702 and a capacity of 1,100—would be approximately 64%. The lowest estimate, using a capacity of 1,300 and the same enrollment figure, would be about 54%. If we calculate utilization based on the number of students enrolled in classes during any given period of the day, the rate drops further: from 59% (based on a capacity of 1,100) to as low as 45% (based on a capacity of 1,300). These variations highlight the complexity of accurately assessing how fully the school is utilizing its space.

Enrollment by Period Fall Semester 2024-25									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Total Capacity	647	630	633	627	619	605	602	587	702
1300	50%	48%	49%	48%	48%	47%	46%	45%	54%
1200	54%	53%	53%	52%	52%	50%	50%	49%	59%
1100	59%	57%	58%	57%	56%	55%	55%	53%	64%

Expressing the utilization rate based on the number of classrooms in use is also subject to interpretation. It requires determining which spaces qualify as instructional—such as whether to include the Learning Commons, gymnasium, seminar rooms, school store, auditorium, and other flexible-use areas. The classification and frequency of use for these spaces can significantly affect how many rooms are considered "active" during each period, making it difficult to establish a single, definitive utilization rate based solely on room usage.

Depending on how instructional spaces are defined, the actual number of rooms is subject to interpretation. Making certain assumptions shown in the table below for the Fall 2024–25 semester, total room counts may vary from 61 to 68. Utilization rates fluctuate accordingly. Using a total of 68 rooms, utilization rates range from a low of 49% (during Period 4) to a high of 57% (Period 2). When calculated using a reduced total of 61 rooms—excluding certain spaces—the utilization rate rises, ranging from 56% (period 4) to 66% (period 1). In practical terms, this means that during any given period, between 20 and 33 rooms are sitting vacant. This variability underscores the importance of clearly defining what counts as educational space when evaluating building efficiency.

Regardless of which set of assumptions we choose, enrollment at Souhegan is well below the 85% target rate.

Total Rooms	Vacant Rooms by Period Fall Semester 2024-25 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
68	28	27	30	33	29	32	32	29
Unutilized	41%	40%	44%	49%	43%	47%	47%	43%
61	21	20	23	26	22	25	25	22
Unutilized	34%	33%	38%	43%	36%	41%	41%	36%
Total Rooms	Rooms Used by Period Fall Semester 2024-25 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
68	38	39	36	33	37	34	34	37
Utilization Rate	56%	57%	53%	49%	54%	50%	50%	54%
61	31	32	29	26	30	27	27	30
Utilization Rate	64%	66%	61%	56%	63%	58%	58%	63%

Comparing the Utilization of the Main Building and the Annex

When discussing the apparent excess capacity regarding the Souhegan High School campus, the question is typically stated in terms of "space in the Annex." This oversimplifies the discussion. Both buildings have become inextricably integrated into the programming of the school. However, there is a window of opportunity that might allow more separation of programming between the two buildings by consolidating certain programming within the main building.

The Annex

The Annex, as previously described, contains between 23 and 26+/- classrooms, depending on how the rooms are defined and configured. When The Annex was originally built, enrollment at Souhegan was at its peak, and the cafeteria in the main building was too small to effectively accommodate all students. As a result, the Annex was equipped with its own subsidiary cafeteria. Over time, as enrollment declined, the Annex cafeteria was converted into an art room. Pottery kilns were installed in the former kitchen and large art tables were placed throughout.

The art room consists of four adjoining rooms—A108, A109, A110, and A111—that can be separated by movable dividers. Together, these rooms total 1647 square footage, averaging just over 400 square feet each. Rooms A103 and A107 are currently configured as a single room that has served for several years as a computer lab.

On the second floor at the front of the building are two large rooms—A202 and A222— that are described as "seminar rooms." They are not currently used as classrooms but are occasionally employed as conference rooms. Room A202 is 387 square feet, and room A222 is 563 square feet. Also on the second floor are six classrooms that have historically served as science rooms. They are equipped with gas lines and running water, but do not meet the current minimum

requirement of 1200 square feet for laboratory classrooms. However, depending on the type of instruction, they may still permissible as “light science” classrooms.

In the fall of 2024, there were between 12 and 18 rooms in use in the Annex each day, for an average of about 16 rooms in use per period. Estimating 25 total rooms in the Annex, the room utilization rate is between 48 and 72%, or an average of about 63% per day.

Total Classrooms	Souhegan High School Annex Fall Semester 2024							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	68.00%	68.00%	68.00%	56.00%	60.00%	64.00%	48.00%	72.00%
25	17	17	17	14	15	16	12	18

The Main Building

The main building consists of about 43 classrooms or student spaces—again, the exact number depends on how rooms are defined and configured. Spaces that might be considered educational space according to the DOE rules but are not typically included in room counts are areas such as the gymnasium (8000 sq ft), the mini gym (800 sq ft), the library (3700 sq ft), the auditorium (5800 sq ft), the weight room (2000 sq ft), the learning commons (four classrooms totaling 2700 sq ft), and the school store (800 sq ft). The weight room is only included in this list because it was previously used as educational space.

In addition to the general-purpose classrooms, there are five science labs, ranging from 1200 to 1750 square feet. Rooms in the main building can vary significantly in size. The smallest room is 425 square feet and is only used as a “break out room.” The largest rooms are the band room at 2165 square feet and the chorus room at 1505 square feet.

During the fall of 2024, there were between 21 and 30 rooms in use, for an average of 24 rooms per period. Estimating 43 total rooms in the main building, the room utilization rate is between 49 and 70% per period, or an average of about 56% per day.

	Souhegan High School Main Building Fall Semester 2024							
Total Classrooms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	60.47%	62.79%	48.84%	48.84%	69.77%	51.16%	55.81%	48.84%
43	26	27	21	21	30	22	24	21

The Annex consolidated into the Main Building

A question that is commonly asked is whether the Annex is truly necessary. Based on a straightforward room count, the Annex still serves a clear purpose. If the classes currently held in the Annex were relocated to the main building, the main building would be between 81% and 105% utilized, with a full day average of over 92%, well above the target maximum of 85%.

Moreover, this analysis does not account for the specific types of spaces required. For example, the 1200 square foot art space would be difficult to replicate in the main building. Similarly, the computer labs and film and photography labs would be challenging to accommodate in the main building.

	Souhegan High School Consolidated Fall Semester 2024							
Total Classrooms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	100.00%	102.33%	88.37%	81.40%	104.65%	88.37%	83.72%	90.70%
	43	44	38	35	45	38	36	39

Taking Advantage of Available Space

The goal of performing this analysis is to assess what space is available and how it can be used to help alleviate the overcrowding in the lower grades. One recurring suggestion is moving seventh and eighth grades onto the Souhegan campus to take advantage of the available space. Assuming the average enrollment of each of these grades is approximately 175 students, this would mean moving a total of 350 students to the campus.

It has already been demonstrated that moving the entire current student body of the high school into the main building would be problematic. Therefore, a logical assumption is that seventh and eighth grade would primarily occupy the Annex, providing both an age appropriate and physically separate space. The remaining surplus rooms could then serve as flexible instructional space shared between the high school and junior high/middle school.

Currently, there are 16 total classrooms for seventh and eighth grades combined. Adding 16 rooms to the utilization chart, assuming the higher estimate of total rooms, yields a utilization rate between 76.5% in period 6 to 88.24% in period 2, with a full day average rate of 82%. Without cutting any course sections or making major changes to the master schedule, this data suggests that moving seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan campus would fall well within the target maximum utilization rate of 85%.

	Souhegan High School Consolidated Fall Semester 2024							
Total Classrooms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	86.76%	88.24%	79.41%	75.00%	89.71%	79.41%	76.47%	80.88%
68	59	60	54	51	61	54	52	55

Conclusion

While the data may suggest that relocating seventh and eighth grades to the Souhegan campus is feasible from a space utilization perspective, it's important to recognize that this conclusion is based on a number of assumptions—many of which are general and may not hold under closer scrutiny. The analysis primarily considers room count and average enrollment figures, without fully accounting for important operational factors such as programmatic needs, staffing configurations, scheduling constraints, age-appropriate facilities, and the broader impacts on school culture and student experience.

Moreover, space utilization alone does not address questions of curriculum alignment, administrative oversight, or the potential need for facility modifications to accommodate younger students. In short, while the numbers indicate potential, a more comprehensive feasibility study would be necessary before any final determination could be made. This analysis should therefore be viewed as a preliminary exploration—useful for informing future conversations, but not sufficient as a standalone justification for such a significant structural change.

APPENDIX B

LEGAL MEMO

Memorandum To: SAU Reconfiguration Subcommittee

From; Dean B. Eggert, Esq. and Alison M. Minutelli, Esq. Wadleigh, Starr & Peters, P.L.L.C.

Date: April 11, 2019

Re: Reconfiguration of Souhegan Cooperative School District — Collective Bargaining, Warrant Articles and Amendments to Articles of Agreement

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During the March 26 meeting, the committee identified three options for reconfiguration: I) the Coop consists of grades 6-12 from both districts; 2) the Coop consists of grades 5-12 from Amherst and grades 6-12 from Mont Vernon; or 3) the Coop consists of grades 5-12 from both districts.

At the March 26 meeting, the majority of the committee agreed to proceed with Option 2.

The committee indicated that they would like to put warrant articles before the voters in March 2020, With an effective date of July 1, 2020.

Due to budgetary considerations, the committee may wish to extend the effective date July 1. 2021 so that they can properly budget for the reconfiguration.

In the alternative, the districts may wish to consider convening special meetings in the fall of 2020 to vote on the reconfiguration issues.

At the request of the committee, we have begun drafting warrant articles and revisions to the existing articles of agreement, based on a reconfiguration using "Option 2," above.

1. Collective Bargaining Issues

At the last meeting of the reorganization committee, there were inquiries about the status of the existing CBAs. Currently, the Cooperative District ("Coop") does not have a union.

Amherst has two unions, teachers and paraprofessionals. The teacher's union CBA is a 4 year agreement and is currently in its first year. The paraprofessional CBA is a 5 year agreement and is also in its first year.

Mont Vernon has one teacher's union; their agreement is a 3 year agreement and is currently in its first year.

Under the current proposal (Option 2), Amherst Middle School would cease to exist and would become part of the Coop. Mont Vernon students would continue to remain in Mont Vernon until the completion of grade 5, at which time they would transition to the Coop (instead of AMS). Thus, there should be no impact on Mont Vernon CBAs under Option 2, as Mont Vernon students currently transition to AMS at grade 6.

The administration Will want to give timely notice to the union once the committee has determined how they will be moving forward, and the Board may want to engage in some quantum of bargaining with the union.

If the reorganization is approved, the Amherst School District would issue reduction in force letters to all staff at AMS, they would cease being employees of the Amherst School District and would become employees of the Coop as of the effective date of the reorganization (assuming they were all hired and accepted employment).

The AMS teachers and paraprofessionals who become Coop employees would receive contracts and be subject to the same policies and procedures as existing Coop staff, and would no longer be covered by the Amherst CBAs as of the effective date of the reorganization.

If the new Coop employees wished to organize, they could do such through the procedures established by the PELRB. The Coop "status quo" would remain in effect while the effort to organize was pending; if the effort to organize is contested, the process may take six months.

The Amherst collective bargaining agreements would remain in effect for Amherst teachers and paraprofessionals who remain employed by Amherst through grade 4.

2. Draft Warrant Articles [1]

Pursuant to RSA 195:16-a, "[a]ny cooperative school district may amend its existing arrangement or articles of agreement to increase or decrease the grades for which the cooperative school district provides education. If the cooperative district was organized pursuant to RSA 195:18, it shall proceed by amendment of its articles of agreement. The cooperative school board shall cease responsibility for the excluded grades as of the date specified in the amended articles of agreement or the existing arrangement." Available at: http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/XV/195/195-16-

a.htm.

The Articles of Agreement ("Articles") indicate that the Cooperative district was formed pursuant to RSA 195:18, with a date of operating responsibility "no later than July I, 1993."

Thus, in order to expand the number of grades that are educated by the Cooperative district, the articles must be amended at a meeting of the legislative body.

A. Procedure for Amending the Articles of Agreement

Prior to amending the Articles, the Cooperative School Board must hold a public hearing concerning the adoption of the amendment, at least 10 days before the annual meeting. Notice of the hearing and text of the proposed amendment must be published in a newspaper having general circulation at least 14 days prior to the hearing. See Article Il.

In addition, the voters must have a "reasonable opportunity for debate in open meeting," and the proposed amendment must pass by a majority vote. Id.

B. Proposed Amendment

Article 3 currently reads: "The Souhegan Cooperative School District shall be responsible for grades 9 through 12, and the school shall be called Souhegan High School."

Suggested revision to Article 3, based on Option 2, above:

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[1] All three districts have adopted the provisions of RSA 40:13.

The Souhegan Cooperative School District shall be responsible for educating students who reside in Amherst, New Hampshire from grades 5-12 and students who reside in Mont Vernon, New Hampshire from grades 6-12.

Additional proposed amendments to the Articles of Agreement are discussed in Section 3, below.

C. Draft Warrant Article to Expand the Grades served by the Cooperative District

Each District will need to include a warrant article, along the lines of the followi ng:

Souhegan Cooperative High School Warrant Article:

Shall the Souhegan Cooperative School District vote to amend the Articles of Agreement Between the Districts of Amherst and Mont Vernon ("Articles of Agreement") as follows:

Amend Article 3 from the present language of:

The Souhegan Cooperative School District shall be responsible for grades 9 through 12, and the school shall be called Souhegan High School.

To the language as follows:

Article 3. The Souhegan Cooperative School District shall be responsible for public education for Students in grades 5-12 who reside in Amherst, New Hampshire, and for public education for Students in grades 6-12 who reside in Mont Vernon, New Hampshire.

Amend Article 4 from its present language of•.

The Souhegan Cooperative School District shall construct the Souhegan High School on land adjacent to the present Amherst Middle School, owned by the Am herst School District, and leased to the Souhegan Cooperative School District.

To the language as follows:

The Souhegan Cooperative School District shall construct the Souhegan High School on land adjacent to the present Amherst middle School, owned by the Amherst School District, and leased to the Souhegan Cooperative School District.

The Amherst School District shall transfer, and the Souhegan Cooperative School District shall assume, responsibility for the maintenance and improvements of the existing Amherst Middle School Building (located at _), along with ownership of the existing Amherst Middle School's fixtures, furnishings and equipment, and the Amherst School District shall lease the land on which the Amherst Middle School is located to the Souhegan Cooperative School District, with a lease which is coterminous with the lease of the High School land.

This warrant article and the proposed amendment(s) to the Articles of Agreement shall only take effect if the voters in the Mont Vernon School District approve

Article on the Mont Vernon School District warrant and if the voters in the Amherst School District approve Article on the Amherst School District warrant; if either article fails, then this article shall be deemed null and void and of no effect and the existing Articles of Agreement shall not be amended.

Note — The Amherst School District has retained ownership of the land on which the Souhegan High School is located, and in 1989 the voters authorized the District to lease that land to Souhegan for a term of 99-years, for the sum of $1.00. We have assumed that the same would occur with the transfer of the Amherst Middle School. The lease would be coterminous with the High School lease

(approximately 68 years). If that is not the case, then Article 4 would require further revisions, as would the warrant article for the Amherst Middle School, below.

Note —in addition to the expansion of grades, other articles in the Articles of Agreement would need to be amended. Those amendments are discussed below, in Section 3, but would also be part of this proposed warrant article and the amendment process referenced in Section B, aboveAmherst Warrant Article:

Shall the Amherst School District vote to increase the grades served by the

Souhegan Cooperative School District (currently grades 9-12) such that effective

July 1, 20 the Souhegan Cooperative School District is responsible for grades 512 for Students residing in Amherst and grades 6-12 for Students residing in Mont

Vernon, and further to authorize the Amherst School Board to transfer the

Amherst Middle School building (located at to the Souhegan Cooperative

School District, along with all fixtures, furnishings and equipment at Amherst Middle School, and to authorize the Amherst School Board to enter into a -year lease for the sum of $1.00 with the Souhegan Cooperative School District for that portion of the land owned by the Amherst School District on which the Amherst Middle School is currently located (Insert location) upon the condition that the lease automatically terminates upon the dissolution of the Souhegan Cooperative School District or if the Souhegan Cooperative School District ceases operation of the building currently known as "Amherst Middle School," and to take any other action necessary to consolidate the Amherst School District grades 5-8 into the Souhegan Cooperative School District? This article shall only take effect if the voters in the Mont Vernon School District approve Article on the Mont Vernon School District warrant and if the voters in the Souhegan Cooperative School District approve Article on the Souhegan Cooperative School District warrant; if either article fails, then this article shall be deemed null and void and of no effect.

Note — we have not undertaken any steps to conduct a Title Review of the Amherst Middle School building and land; these draft articles and amendments assume that there are no restrictions or limitations on the Amherst School District's ability to transfer title to the building and/or lease the land.

Mont Vernon Warrant Article

Shall the Mont Vernon School District vote to amend Article 3 of the Articles of Agreement for the Souhegan Cooperative School District to increase the grades served by the Souhegan Cooperative School District (currently grades 9-12) such that the Souhegan Cooperative School District is responsible for grades 6-12 for Students residing in Mont Vernon and grades 5-12 for Students residing in Amherst, effective July I, 20_, and further to take any other action necessary to consolidate the Mont Vernon School District grade 6-8 into the Souhegan Cooperative School District? This article shall only take effect if the voters in the Amherst School District approve Article on the Amherst School District warrant and if the voters in the Souhegan Cooperative School District approve Article ___on the Souhegan Cooperative School District warrant; if either article fails, then this article shall be deemed null and void and of no effect.

3. Revisions to the Articles of Agreement

At the outset, Article 3 will need to be amended as noted above, to reflect the expansion of grades.

In addition, the following additional articles will require amendment to reflect the grade expansion. (Existing language has been struck-through and new language is referenced in bold).

Article I must be amended to remove the reference to "high school district" and instead refer to cooperative school district: "The School Districts of Amherst and Mont Vernon shall be combined to form a cooperative school district which shall be named the Souhegan Cooperative School District, pursuant to RSA 195."

Article 5 apportions the capital and operating expenses of the Cooperative district based on the average daily member of high school pupils in each district, and will also need to be expanded to reflect Amherst resident pupils from grades 5-12 and Mont Vernon resident pupils from grades 6-12:

The capital and operating expenses of the Souhegan Cooperative School District payable in each fiscal year shall be apportioned 50% on the average daily membership of the ~~high school~~ pupils in grades 5-12 who reside in Amherst and of the pupils in grades 6-12 who reside in Mont Vernon ~~each pre-existingdistrict of the Cooperative School District~~ during the preceding fiscal year, asdetermined by the State Department of Education, and 50% on the equalized valuation of the pre-existing districts, as determined by the Department of Revenue Administration and available at the time of the annual school district meeting.

Similarly, Article 6 would need to be amended to reflect the expansion from grades 9-12 to Amherst grades 5-12 and Mont Vernon grades 6-12: "The State Aid to which each pre-existing district would be entitled if it were not part of the Souhegan Cooperative School District, ~~grades 9 through 12,~~grades 5-12 for pupils residing in Amherst and grades 6-12 for pupils residing in Mont Vernon, shall be credited to such district's share of the total operating budget.

The State Building Aid which may be available to the Souhegan Cooperative School District shall be applied to reduce the capital expenditure prior to the apportionment of costs under the provisions of Article 5."

In addition, Article 10 would need to be amended to reflect our statutory obligation to provide transportation to pupils through 8th grade, who live more than 2 miles from the school to which they are assigned, RSA 189:6.

The Souhegan Cooperative School District shall provide transportation for students ~~n grades 9 through 12~~ in grades 5-12 who reside in Amherst and for students in grades 6-12 who reside in Mont Vernon, regardless of age under terms decided by the Souhegan Cooperative School Board.

Note — Currently, the Articles provide that the Coop provides transportation for high school students; this is not required by RSA 189:6, but we have not proposed to change this existing practice. If the Committee wishes to do such, we can draft alternate language for this amendment.

Article 12 should be amended as follows: "The date of operating responsibility of the Souhegan Cooperative School District shall be no later than July I, 1993 for pupils in grades 9-12 and shall be July 1, 202_ for grades 5-12 for Amherst resident students and grades 6-12 for Mont Vernon resident students."

Finally, although not required by the proposed grade expansion, if the composition of the existing Souhegan Cooperative School Board does not meet the requirements of RSA 195: 19 and the "one-man one-vote" principle, the Board may wish to consider whether Article 2 should be amended as well. As this is not a required component of the grade expansion we have not undertaken an extensive review of this issue at this juncture.

4. Additional Items

The tuition agreement between Mont Vernon and Amherst will need to be terminated as of the reconfiguration takes effect, if the reconfiguration proposal passes. This may need to be included as part of the warrant article, above; we do not have a copy of this agreement and have not reviewed the termination provision(s).

The following matters Will need to be discussed by the Committee; depending on the outcome of these discussions, further revisions to the above warrant articles and/or articles of agreement may be necessary;

- The Articles of Agreement do not include a process of acquisition of property by the Coop. RSA 195:9 (available at: http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/XV/195/1959.htm) outlines the process of acquisition of property by a cooperative school district, when the cooperative is "established," however, this process will likely apply to a grade expansion. That provision provides, in part: "Ill. The decision of the committee with respect to the appraisal shall be final. Unless otherwise provided in the articles of agreement. at the next annual assessment a tax equivalent to the total appraised value of the property to be used by the cooperative district shall be levied upon the several districts comprising the cooperative school district in the proportion that the equalized valuation of each bears to the equalized valuation of the whole and there shall be remitted to the taxpayers of each pre-existing district the appraised value of its property. Whenever the cooperative school board decides the foregoing adjustment will work a hardshiQ on any one or all of the pre-existing districts. it may. of its own motion, or upon petition of anv of the residents of a pre-existing district provide that such adiustment be made over a period of not exceeding 20 years." o The committee/boards will need to determine whether this should be addressed in the articles of agreement.
- The Articles of Agreement are silent as to the disposition of property by the Coop; the committee will need to determine whether it is recommending language be added to the Articles to address the disposition of property owned by the Coop.

Finally, if the Amherst School District wishes to retain ownership of the AMS land, it will be helpful for us to have a copy of the existing lease between Amherst and the Coop for the High School land.

Steps to Expand the Souhegan Cooperative District to Include 7th and 8th Grades

This framework outlines the key steps required to transition Mont Vernon's 7th and 8th grade students into a shared 7–8 grade junior high located on the Souhegan High School campus. A 7–8 model is preferable because it mirrors the current practice—Mont Vernon Village School serves students through 6th grade, after which students attend Amherst Middle School for grades 7 and 8. This structure balances academic opportunity with developmental appropriateness, providing access to high-quality shared resources while preserving a distinct identity for younger students. Only a 7–8 model is under consideration to maintain continuity with current grade transitions and to ensure alignment with existing infrastructure and community expectations. The goal is to maintain age-appropriate programming while leveraging existing facilities and cooperative governance structures.

1. Educational & Programmatic Planning

Goal: Define the academic structure and program requirements for a 7–8 junior high.

- Model is limited to grades 7 and 8 only.
- Structure should provide a distinct identity and programming for this age group, while enabling alignment with high school instruction and resources.
- Align core subjects across districts (Amherst and Mont Vernon).
- Build pathways for accelerated learners to access select high school courses.
- Define age-appropriate electives, enrichment, and support services.
- Determine when and how junior high students can access high school science labs, arts spaces, athletic facilities, and academic support.

2. Facilities & Space Utilization

Goal: Identify suitable space and estimate costs for adapting it to a 7–8 junior high model.

- Conduct a campus-wide audit of existing classroom availability, utilization rates, and areas that are currently underused.
- Evaluate designating a distinct area—such as the Annex—as the junior high zone. The Annex already includes office spaces and a teacher lounge, potentially serving as the administrative core.
- Identify modifications required to ensure age-appropriate learning environments, including classroom retrofits, furnishings, and signage.
- Determine whether a separate, secure entrance and distinct circulation pattern are feasible to maintain developmental separation from high school students.
- Estimate the costs for any necessary improvements, including technology upgrades, lockers, common spaces, or outdoor areas specific to 7th–8th grade use.
- Plan for time-based or schedule-based sharing of the cafeteria, gym, library, and arts facilities to avoid building new infrastructure.
- Ensure that these shared spaces remain accessible while respecting the developmental needs and independence of the junior high cohort.

3. Staffing & Human Resources

Goal: Plan for efficient, certified staffing and fair personnel transitions.

- Determine which positions can transition from existing schools, prioritizing both teacher certification and individual preferences where possible to maintain morale and ensure appropriate instructional coverage.
- Identify new hires needed and leverage teachers with 7–12 certification for crossover instruction.

- Ensure all teaching staff meet NH DOE requirements for grades 7 and 8.
- Plan for special education, interventionists, and guidance services tailored to this age group.
- Work with unions on potential reassignments, Reduction in Force (RIF) and rehire processes, collective bargaining, retirement and seniority issues.
- Respect teacher preferences where possible to retain morale and continuity.

4. Legal & Procedural Steps

Goal: Follow state-required process to expand the cooperative district grade span.

- Begin by outlining the purpose and importance of the expansion, emphasizing the need to comply with RSA 195 and ensure educational quality.
- Develop a detailed plan outlining the benefits, financials, logistics, and timeline of adding grades 7 and 8 to the Souhegan Cooperative District.
- File the plan with the NH DOE and seek approval from the State Board of Education under RSA 195.
- Hold formal public hearings in both Amherst and Mont Vernon to present the plan and take input.
- Place the expansion proposal on the ballot for both towns.
- A majority vote in each town is required for approval.

5. Financial Planning & Governance

Goal: Ensure fair cost-sharing and cooperative governance.

- Update the existing Souhegan cost-sharing formula to reflect the inclusion of grades 7 and 8.
- Include marginal costs of staffing and any capital upgrades in proportion to enrollment.
- Transition away from the Mont Vernon–Amherst tuition contract for 7–8 students.
- All students would instead be part of the same district, reducing redundancy and legal complexity.
- Mont Vernon retains its proportional representation on the Souhegan Cooperative School Board, unlike the current tuition model where Mont Vernon has no vote on decisions affecting its 7–8 students.

6. Implementation & Communication

Goal: Execute the transition smoothly and with community buy-in.

- Define target launch year and provide a projected multi-year timeline to help stakeholders visualize the full implementation process (e.g., 18–24 months from planning to full integration).
- Launch a communications plan to build understanding and support across both towns.
- Use community forums, FAQs, and school-led outreach.
- Form a joint transition committee to monitor progress, troubleshoot concerns, and provide public updates.

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