

Middle School Unification

What is the Problem?

The student population is declining in Hampden and Wilbraham, as well as in most of the Northeast. The trend in Wilbraham shows a drop from 634 Middle School students in 2010-11 (grades 6-8) to 448 in 2020-21; in Hampden (grades 5-8) the drop is from 302 to 176 in the same general time frame. The actual enrollment, to date, has dropped even a bit further than predicted in the professional studies.

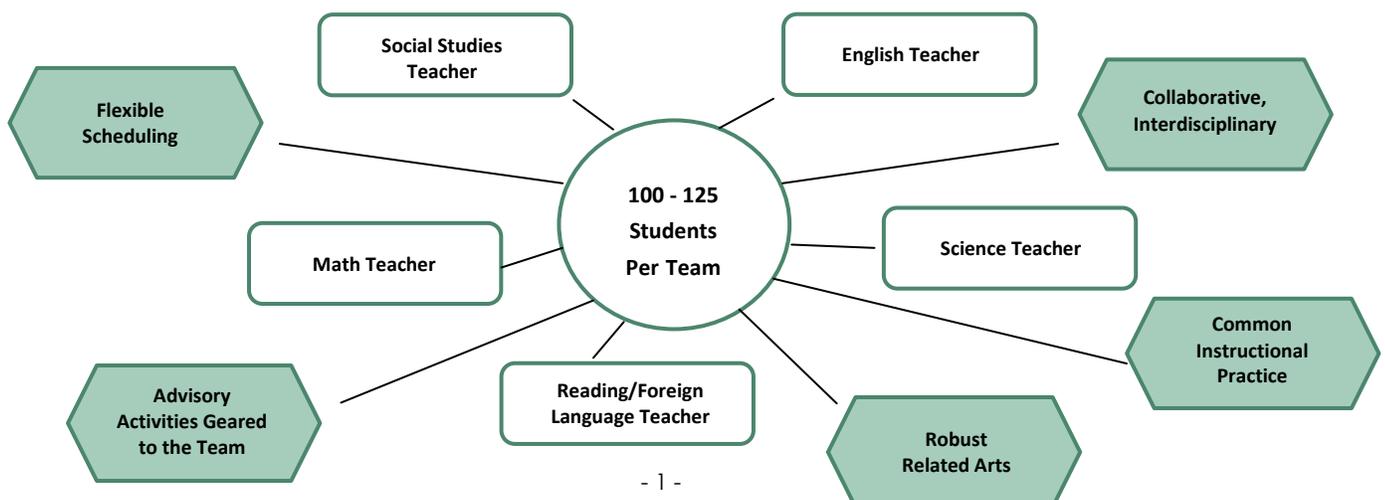
Having fewer students may seem like there would be smaller class sizes, and more individualized teaching. In reality, state funding is tied to student population. Declining numbers means less funding, fewer teachers, and fewer options. To the detriment of students in both towns, resources are being stretched thin across two buildings. Our middle schools are already seeing the impacts, such as:

- Fewer opportunities for multi-tiered core classes, e.g., the inability to offer advanced mathematics;
- Elimination of related arts classes such as Information & Science Technology;
- Teachers are teaching outside their area of certification and area of expertise (5th grade social studies teacher - teaching 6th grade science and math classes);
- Too few students in Thornton W. Burgess Middle School to make up a band;
- Students at Wilbraham Middle School being on teams of mixed age and grade levels.

As early as the fall of 2016, programming will be further affected if we don't come together and act to save our schools.

Middle school is a key transitional time in adolescence. Students may be emotionally fragile and have specific social needs that educators must attend to, while still educating them to the highest standards. The Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District supports the Middle School Model of teaching.

MIDDLE SCHOOL MODEL (EXAMPLE OF A GRADE LEVEL TEAM)



This approach allows students to be surrounded by a smaller, core teaching “team” monitoring each student across classes, supporting them with coordinated curriculum topics, and providing them with smaller social structures. It also allows the flexibility to schedule students having difficulties with peers into another team, providing them with the space they need to grow as individuals. This model supports students as they transition to Minnechaug Regional High School. The team approach is at risk with a declining student population that is being housed in two buildings.

What can we do?

Hampden and Wilbraham students are already educated together at Minnechaug Regional High School. We can bring them together earlier as a unified District *community*, so children can continue the cross-town bonds they’ve already developed through shared sports and social activities which are often started at the elementary school age. Earlier unification brings the children together before social cliques solidify in later grades.

Working together, the towns of Hampden and Wilbraham share their strength in numbers. Bringing students together in middle school best ensures the children from both towns will enter the regional high school at the same starting point. The students in *both* towns need classes that meet their specific learning needs, provide related arts opportunities, and are taught by teachers working in their specialty. Many students at this age are motivated to come to school and learn just because of that special class that speaks to them. If we unify the students in one middle school, we can keep enrollment numbers high enough to support a strong educational program for the *District*, which already comprises students in both towns.

With unification, we would no longer have to duplicate expenses; including maintaining two separate, aging buildings. We can save money - which will let us save teachers, programs, and the successful middle school team model. None of us want larger class sizes, or for students to get “lost” in a big school. The team model allows the school administration to keep class sizes reasonable and to support students in smaller groups, which best ensures they get the attention they need and deserve. However, a single class with only a handful of students - of different ages and abilities - is not sustainable from a financial or team model perspective and, in turn, hurts our children’s chances of success. The District is already facing this scenario.

A feasibility study prepared by JLS Architects, Inc. has shown us that both schools need significant capital investments just to bring the buildings up to code - never mind bringing them into the current century of learning. Currently, neither school can fit both sets of students, but modular space can be added temporarily to the Wilbraham Middle School at an estimated cost of approximately \$600,000, including lease and installation. These structures are only temporary, but can be safe and functional over the short number of years required. The study indicated that using modular space at Thornton W. Burgess Middle School would trigger (by law) renovation costs estimated at \$26.7 million. For the long term solution, the School Committee can petition the Massachusetts School Building Authority to see what state funding is available to either renovate or build a school that will bring our students together. If we want the state funding (usually at \$.50 on the dollar), the Commonwealth, with input from the communities, will decide the best location for their

investment with us based on studies that will be conducted. Otherwise, the community can choose to bear 100% of the costs on their own.

Who will decide?

You, the voter will decide. Residents in Hampden and Wilbraham will both need to vote to support the children, and to allow the Regional Agreement to be modified to bring the students together at the middle school level.

The Middle School Task Force includes volunteer parents from Hampden and Wilbraham, along with teachers and principals from each middle school, members of the select boards from each town, school committee members from each town, and District administrators. For the past year, we have been doing what you would do – researching, asking questions, exploring many options. Rather than having each resident spend an entire year as we have, we’ve done the homework for you. We’ve been critical, but open minded. We’ve been upset, but hopeful. As a group - as your neighbors - we have come to recommend that the District unify the middle schools. We have asked the School Committee to take immediate steps toward both a short term and a long term solution. Those recommendations are as follows:

“In order to meet the middle school model and support the educational, social and emotional needs of the children of Hampden and Wilbraham, we recommend that the School Committee expeditiously move toward the unified school to be placed at the Wilbraham Middle School in the short term.”

“Recommend the school committee pursue a long term unified approach to a facility as deemed appropriate by a partnership with the MSBA to meet the middle school model and support the educational, social and emotional needs of the children of Hampden and Wilbraham.”

Before any final action can be taken, however, you will need to vote at a town meeting to save and improve the educational experience for students across the District at the middle school level.

When do we need to act?

The time to help is NOW. Review the background materials on the District web-page at www.hwrsd.org. Attend Task Force and School Committee meetings, or watch them on public access television at <http://www.wilbraham-ma.gov/index.aspx?NID=179>. Participate in the community survey that will seek your opinions on these items. We urge people to do more than just read social media, and encourage all to rely on the facts. When all the research is done and it’s time to schedule a town meeting vote – please, come participate and vote to support our communities and our children. As early as the fall of 2016, programming will be further affected if we don’t come together and act to save our schools.

The District has been piecing together solutions to account for the low numbers, but already our students' education is suffering and, sadly, our District's reputation may begin to seriously decline. Parents are even discussing pulling their children from the District schools if improvements are not put in place soon.

A strong **school district** often correlates to higher property values, reflects a better educated population, and attracts more business and industry. Regardless of what town a school is located in, a high performing school district is what will keep the communities together and draw others to live in our unique and individual towns.

"In two short years, the difference between what my 7th grader had and what my 5th grader has now, are vastly different learning experiences."

*Carey Penna
Parent, Hampden*

"The opportunities available to all Hampden and Wilbraham Middle School children are diminished when resources are spread thin across two schools."

Marty O'Shea
Superintendent

"Save my program, save my school, not my bricks."
Peter Dufresne
TWB Principal

"Kids in Hampden and Wilbraham are not having the same educational experience."

Noel Pixley
WMS Principal

~~~Presented by The Middle School Task Force~~~