

Middle School Initiative FAQ

Note from HWRSD Superintendent Marty O'Shea:

HWRSD has created a Middle School Task Force to explore how we can remain positioned for success at the middle school level. The current program is being jeopardized by rising costs associated with running two programs, declining enrollment and stagnant state aid. This dilemma is made more complicated by the physical deficiencies of both Thornton W. Burgess Middle School and Wilbraham Middle School. After several months of study, the MSTF has taken the position that educationally and financially HWRSD can best meet the academic, social, physical and emotional needs of its young adolescents in a single middle school. As a public service, over the course of three issues, the Times will provide readers with answers to questions that are frequently asked about this important issue. Today topics relate to enrollment, the goals of the study, and educational considerations. Subsequent installments will address social considerations, the Middle School Team model, finances, facilities, alternatives, space and location, transportation and the planning, review and approval process. The contents of the entire FAQ can be viewed at www.hwrsd.org

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Enrollment:

1. **How has and will enrollment at TWB and WMS change?** At TWB, a grade 5-8 school, 409 students were enrolled in 2000. This year 262 students attend TWB. When Hampden's grade K-3 move to grades 5-8, TWB will have 165 students. At Wilbraham Middle, a grade 6-8 school, 646 students were enrolled in 1999. (In 2000, WMS became a grade 7-8 school; in 2010 it was restored as a grade 6-8 school). This year 536 students attend WMS. When Wilbraham's grade K-2 students move into grades 6-8, WMS will have 441 students.
2. **How has and will total Grade 6-8 enrollment change?** Across both towns the District enrolled 915 students in grades 6-8 in 2003. Based on students currently in elementary school, we expect to enroll 564 students in grades 6-8 in 2020.
3. **How has and will total HWRSD enrollment change?** In 2004, there were 3741 students attending HWRSD schools. A projection by the New England School Development Council projects that the District will enroll 2546 students in 2024.
4. **What is happening statewide and regionally with enrollment and population?** At the state level, a UMASS population study projects that between 2010 and 2030 the Lower Pioneer Valley will experience a decrease of 4.5% if recent trends in migration, fertility, and mortality continue.

5. **Will these trends be reversed by a rebound in the housing market or by the casino project?** Four major studies reviewed by the Middle School Task Force and posted to www.hwrdsd.org do not show that the trends will be reversed significantly. A 2013 study prepared by the National Association for Realtors states that there will be relatively “few” managerial gaming positions created by the casino project.
6. **Where can I find additional information about enrollment and regional demographics?** On its website, www.hwrdsd.org, the District has made available documentation developed internally, reports from the New England School Development Council, the UMASS Donahue Institute and the Pioneer Institute.

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Goals and Time line

1. **What has been decided so far?** No decisions have been made, however, the Middle School Task Force has concluded that educationally and financially the District can best meet the academic, social, physical and emotional needs of HWRSD young adolescents in a single middle school. To that end, the Task Force has recommended that the School Committee explore the short term feasibility of combining schools as early as the fall of 2016 and also recommended that the School Committee explore a long term facility solution to ensure that the District has a facility that meets 21st century learning needs, meets long term enrollment patterns and is responsive to the fiscal environments in our two communities.
2. **How and where could the District create a single HWRSD middle school as early as 2016?** This has not been decided. Additional information is needed. The District is preparing to conduct a professional third-party architectural and engineering study to determine the feasibility and viability of combining at either the TWB or WMS site using modular classrooms. The study will also explore existing conditions at each building in order to help the District develop a long term plan and to help the District understand the long-term viability of each site.
3. **Are modular classrooms well-designed and educationally appropriate for children?** Yes. Modular space can be designed and built according to an owner’s specifications. Modular space is safe, temporary, affordable and flexible and can be designed and built to offer all the aesthetic features and educational benefits of space that is constructed on-site. The word "modular" does not describe a building type or style, it simply describes a means of off-site construction.
4. **What would be included in this feasibility study?** The study would attempt to identify potential locations of modular space; purchase, lease-purchase, rental options and desired construction specifications. The study would also assess code requirements, roadways and parking, playfields, building security and life safety systems, toilet room capacity, utility capacities, and technology infrastructure. To begin to understand the District’s long term options and the long-term viability of each site the study will also provide the District with a survey of existing conditions at each building.
5. **The District has announced that it is exploring the feasibility of consolidating in 2016. Does it need to happen so quickly?** Significant educational improvements and significant savings could be achieved if a single HWRSD Middle School is created. For the benefit of students currently enrolled, these advantages should be captured as soon as possible. The economic and educational inefficiencies of the current configuration need to be corrected as

soon as possible. Services will be reduced each year that passes. The negative effects associated with declining enrollment and stagnant state aid may surface as early as the 2015-2016 school year given the budget gap that is projected for FY 16. Waiting for enrollment to reverse itself or waiting seven or eight years for a “new school” is not an option.

6. **Why has the District focused on one plan?** The planning has focused on a single *goal* – how to improve middle school education for the students of HWRSD despite declining enrollment, rising costs and stagnant state aid. Other plans or grade configurations that have been offered might be educationally effective or cost effective, but the District has not found one that is both. Keeping cohorts of students together is a key consideration. The solution should not involve assigning only a portion of a particular grade or particular town to a particular school.
7. **Is the District working toward the construction of a new middle school or the renovation of one?** No. The MSTF has concerns about the deficiencies of each middle school and has recommended that the School Committee explore what options might be available to us through the MA School Building Authority (MSBA). The School Committee has not taken action on submitting a Statement of Interest to the MSBA for a middle school project.
8. **If an MA School Building Authority (MSBA) supported middle school project was desirable, what is the earliest time District students could access a new or a newly renovated middle school?** The path to working with the MSBA to address the deficiencies of one or both of our middle school buildings is lengthy and uncertain. If the District submitted a Statement of Interest (SOI) to the MSBA in April of 2016, the doors for a newly renovated or new school could not be opened until Fall, 2022, at the earliest. There are also many hurdles along the way. To begin, only about ten percent of districts that submit SOIs are invited into the MSBA funding pipeline. It is also unclear whether town officials and town residents of Hampden and Wilbraham would authorize the project. In short, the District should be prepared to explore its options with the MSBA, but it cannot develop middle school plans that *depend on* an ambitious MSBA supported building project.

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Educational Considerations

1. **What are the educational benefits of creating a single HWRSD middle school?** A consolidated middle school will improve programming, enhance offerings and help the District realize the Middle School Model (addressed later in FAQ). In the middle school model, teachers are assigned to a grade level team where students benefit from the instructional and social consistency that comes from being taught by a team of teachers.
2. **How will related arts (PE, information technology, technology and engineering, art and music) be improved?** An HWRSD middle school will allow the District to expand our existing level of related arts services. In a single middle school, students from both towns will have equal access to a full range of grade-appropriate related arts programs including information technology, technology and engineering, art, music and physical education. It will ensure, for example, that all middle school students can benefit from the services of a full time, full-year art teacher and that all middle school students interested in music can join a grade level band, as opposed to being enrolled in a multi-grade general music class. Consider, for example, if our technology and engineering teachers wanted to improve their program by introducing robotics

or 3-D printing technology. It would be possible to make this investment at one school, but prohibitive in two schools. An HWRSD middle school will eliminate the related arts inequities and inconsistencies that currently exist and will inevitably become more pronounced if consolidation does not occur. If HWRSD maintains two middle schools, some related arts will inevitably be reduced or eliminated.

3. **How will core instruction be improved?** The instructional core (math, English, social studies, science) will strengthen through the implementation of a true, fully staffed middle school model. All subjects will be taught by teachers working in their area of expertise. In a single school foreign language, which has endured cuts at the middle school level, could be permanently established as a two year option.
4. **Will an HWRSD Middle School support rigor and maintain HWRSD's tradition of excellence?** Yes. A larger pool of students will allow for more academic specialization. Principals will have more sections, more teachers and more classes to choose from when developing a student's schedule. Additionally, with the middle school model preserved (addressed later in FAQ), teachers will be assigned within their area of expertise and at a grade level where they have experience. Increasingly, if the District tries to maintain two middle schools, teachers will be assigned out of their area of expertise.
5. **Would curriculum coordination and alignment improve in an HWRSD Middle School?** Yes. Curriculum, supervision, instruction, professional development/training, can be focused and targeted at one school rather than two. By preserving the Middle School Model (addressed later in FAQ) teachers will have more time during the day for collaboration and team meetings. Finally, in a single middle school Special Education services can be focused and more inclusive.
6. **How large would class size be in the new HWRSD middle school?** The District has historically been committed to maintaining class size under 25 in core academic classes. The single middle school initiative ensures that this commitment will be maintained. It cannot be guaranteed if the District attempts to maintain two middle schools.

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Social Considerations

1. **How will the District ensure that consolidation is a positive social experience?** Advisory programs, transitional activities, extra-curriculars, orientations, ice-breakers and all-school activities will be used to build positive school culture and acclimate students. These techniques have worked at MRHS for many years and can be replicated at the middle school level. Students from both towns already consolidate at the high school and participate together in many youth sports. Commingling earlier will allow peer networks to expand and Hampden and Wilbraham students to integrate earlier in life before peer groups are more solidified.
2. **How will the size of the HWRSD middle school affect social relationships among students?** The new HWRSD Middle School would be comparable in size to other middle schools in the area and would be "teamed" (see question 5) to create smaller learning communities within the school. Teams create connectedness and a sense of belonging for students. Additionally, in the HWRSD middle school a principal would have more sections, more teachers and more classes to choose from when developing a student's schedule. As a result, students will have classes with an appropriate peer group.

3. **How will counseling and behavioral supports improve at a single HWRSD middle school?** Currently, guidance counseling, psychological testing and adjustment counseling services are stretched thin at two buildings. In a single middle school these social and emotional supports would be more coordinated, less redundant and more effective.

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The Team Model

1. **Why have some presentations focused on the importance of a “middle school teaming”?** HWRSD is interested in sustaining and enhancing the middle school team model. The vast majority of middle schools are organized into teams. In a high functioning middle school, students are grouped on a grade level team of about 100 students and all 100 students have the same teachers. This model is jeopardized by declining enrollment and inefficiencies associated with staffing and operating two middle schools. The team model can be achieved in a single HWRSD middle school. It cannot be sustained if HWRSD operates two middle schools.
2. **What academic advantages do students derive from being taught in a team model?** The academic advantages of a team model are realized through the ability of a group of teachers (4-5) to focus and collaborate on students specifically on their grade level team. In the team model, 4-5 teachers would share the same 100 students. Students benefit when teachers on a team work collaboratively to develop common expectations. Teamed teachers share instructional practice, assign interdisciplinary projects and collaboratively identify the best way to support a child academically.
3. **What social advantages do students derive from being taught in a team model?** Today’s young adolescents face significant social pressures. Teaming creates a personalized learning environment and a sense of connectedness for students and provides teachers with a framework to collaboratively support their students’ social and emotional needs. Teams, for example, can set common behavioral expectations and collaboratively problem solve when students are experiencing social difficulty in school.

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Finances

1. **What financial factors have prompted the need to consider consolidating into a single middle school?** The District’s main source of revenue from the state, Chapter 70 Aid, has remained flat in recent years because it is tied to enrollment. Meanwhile the percentage of the HWRSD budget derived from local assessments to Hampden and Wilbraham has increased steadily in recent years leaving each town with less funds for other important services. In an environment where costs are rising, revenue is stagnant and enrollment is declining, the District can no longer sustain adequate programming and operations at two middle schools.
2. **Has the District studied the potential for savings associated with consolidation?** Yes. In short, the District will be able to do more for students and reduce costs. A combined middle school would capture significant *annual* savings in terms of operations and personnel. Economies of scale would be achieved in the areas of administration, maintenance and food service. If existing level of services were simply maintained in a combined configuration, then the District would save approximately \$1,200,000 annually in personnel costs. Depending on

which building was closed, the District would also save between \$250,000 and \$320,000 per year in operational costs including, but not limited to utilities, maintenance of building and grounds and insurances. The savings would be sufficient to allow for greater investment in our middle schools. The District would be able to improve offerings and services to students beyond what is currently offered.

3. **Would the schools experience staffing reductions in a combined configuration?** Given the fiscal and demographic challenges, staffing reductions are inevitable. Combining at the middle level will allow the reductions to occur in a manner that is educationally beneficial. The efficiency associated with combining would result in the total loss of between 15 and 22 positions, a figure that includes 5-7 non-teaching staff. In most areas, redundancy would be eliminated and staffing would go down. In some areas, specifically the related arts (PE, Tech and Engineering, Art, Music, Information Technology) staff to student ratios would be improved to support student learning.
4. **How much savings in personnel costs would the District anticipate in a combined configuration?** If existing services were simply duplicated in a combined configuration, then the District would save approximately \$1,200,000 annually. The savings would be sufficient to allow for greater investment in our middle schools. The District would be able to improve offerings and services to students beyond what is currently offered and would move closer to the middle school model.
5. **What operational savings would be achieved?** Depending on which building was closed, the District would save between \$250,000 and \$320,000 per year in operational costs including, but not limited to utilities, maintenance of building and grounds and insurances.
6. **Would there be other savings?** Both buildings are in need of major capital investment. TWB was built in 1967. WMS was built in 1968. Neither building has undergone a renovation. Each building is in need of a roof, a parking lot, new doors and replacement windows. The technology and communication infrastructures at each building are in need of upgrade. The towns would benefit from sharing in the cost of maintaining and improving one building rather than two.
7. **How do reductions associated with a combined configuration compare with the staffing reductions associated with trying to sustain two middle schools?** In a single middle school, the reductions would be difficult given that they involve respected HWRSD professionals. However, the end result would be a more cost effective and educationally effective model. Our students would benefit. The reductions associated with maintaining two middle schools would be far more troubling as the end result would be diminished services for our students. The reductions associated with combining at the middle level cut costs *and* improve services.
8. **Would the savings associated with a combined configuration eliminate HWRSD's seemingly annual budget woes?** A combined middle school would yield significant annual savings. As of March 23, 2015 the District projects that the HWRSD budget will fall \$1.3 million below the level necessary to maintain existing services for next year. There is reason to believe that this sort of budget gap will be an annual occurrence unless the District takes significant steps to bring costs in line with revenue.
9. **Would there be costs associated with combining the two middle schools?** The cost of purchasing or leasing modular classroom space still needs to be determined. Generally,

districts have found modular space to be an affordable way to provide quality educational space for a short period of time. Additionally, the District would likely incur slightly higher busing costs to insure that travel time to and from school is reasonable. The District may need to add a bus to the fleet. Finally, the District would need to plan for one-time costs associated with moving personnel, supplies and equipment into a single facility.

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Facilities

- 1. Which facility and site is better suited to hosting a combined regional middle school?** As noted above, both buildings are similar in age and condition. The District is prepared to enlist professionals to study existing conditions and determine which site provides the more feasible, viable site to host a combined middle school. The study will also examine existing conditions at each school in order to help us understand the long-term viability of each building.
- 2. What is the age of each building?** Wilbraham Middle School was built in 1968. TWB was built in 1967
- 3. How large is each school?** Wilbraham Middle School is 99,750 square feet; Thornton W. Burgess is 76,883 square feet. WMS sits on 63 acres; TWB is situated on 27 acres
- 4. Have there been any renovations at either school?** TWB was the recipient of a high efficiency boiler and domestic hot water upgrades in 2000. The boiler and domestic hot water at WMS were upgraded in 1999 and converted to natural gas. No major structural or component renovations have been recently performed at either building.
- 5. What major components need replacement or renovation? What are the major capital issues?** The roofs, windows, doors, and parking lots are the end of their useful lives at each site. Most components at each building including interior and exterior lighting, electrical service, communication systems, floors and ceilings are, for the most part, original to the building.
- 6. Does the District need additional information about the needs of each facility?** Yes. A comprehensive study of the existing conditions is needed to fully understand the long term viability of each site and the potential costs associated with renovating or replacing one or both buildings.
- 7. Where can I find additional information?** The District has posted several documents, studies and presentations to its website, www.hwrdsd.org.

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What happens if a single middle school is not created?

- 1. What will happen if the voters disapprove the consolidation?** The financial and educational base of the District will be continue to be negatively affected by the costs associated with operating two middle schools. Services at all schools will be impacted. In order for costs to match revenue, programming and staffing will be reduced particularly, but not exclusively, at the middle school level. As of March 23, 2015, District administrators project that the HWRSD budget for the 2015-2016 school year will fall \$1.3 million below the level necessary to maintain existing services. There is reason to believe that this sort of budget gap will be an

annual occurrence unless the District takes significant steps to reduce costs or unless the state revenue increases dramatically. The latter is unlikely to occur.

- 2. What are some examples of what would happen educationally if a single HWRSD middle school is not created?** At TWB, the number of students at each grade will soon allow for only two sections of each subject at each grade level. With fewer scheduling options HWRSD will not be able to guarantee that TWB students will be appropriately placed based on academic and social needs. Increasingly, at TWB and WMS teachers will teach out of their area of expertise. Math teachers would teach social studies for example. Fiscal challenges have made it difficult to maintain equitable and adequate foreign language instruction at each school. French has been eliminated and in 2013-2014, Wilbraham Middle offered only Spanish at Grade 8. It was restored as a two year offering this year, but it will be jeopardized in the coming year(s). Each school would rely more on part-time staff who are difficult to retain in a competitive job market and who are, generally, less invested in the school learning community than full-time staff. Related Arts classes (PE, Art, Music, Information Technology, Science and Engineering) at both WMS and TWB will be negatively affected. The following related arts scenarios will be typical: students will have fewer offerings, the offerings will not be available each term, the teachers will be less than full time, students will be in classes with students from other grades (general music instead of 7th grade band, for example), optimal size classes will be tough to achieve. Counseling services will be reduced at each school. Rather than being assigned to a grade level team (teaching only 8th graders for example), teachers would need to be assigned to a department based on their discipline (i.e., math). Students will not benefit from the instructional and social consistency that comes from being taught by a team of teachers who share the same students. The team model (see question 5) will be eroded.

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Space and Location

- 1. What is the enrollment capacity of each middle school currently?** TWB has an enrollment capacity of about 350 students. Currently, there are 262 students in grades 5-8 and 206 students in grades 6-8. WMS has an enrollment capacity of 630 students. There are currently 536 students enrolled in grades 6-8.
- 2. Has the District estimated how much additional space would be needed at each middle school?** Yes. Simulated schedules were run at each school demonstrating that in 2016-2017 WMS would need an additional four classrooms in a consolidated configuration, while TWB would need between 20 and 24. The need for additional space at WMS would be eliminated in the 2019-2020 school year based on current trends. In other words, WMS will provide sufficient space for the projected enrollment. TWB would have a permanent need for additional space.
- 3. How would this additional space be secured?** The District is preparing to conduct a professional third-party architectural and engineering study of existing conditions and determine the feasibility and viability of combining at each site. In the short term, this would involve using modular classroom space.
- 4. Are modular classrooms well-designed and educationally appropriate for children?** Yes. Modular space can be designed and built according to an owner's specifications. Modular space

is safe, temporary, affordable and flexible and can be designed and built to offer all the aesthetic feature and educational benefits of space that is constructed on-site. The word "modular" does not describe a building type or style, it simply describes a means of off-site construction.

- 5. What would be included in this feasibility study?** The study would seek to identify potential locations; purchase, lease-purchase, rental options and desired construction specifications. The study would also assess code requirements, roadways and parking, playfields, building security and life safety systems, toilet room capacity, utility capacities, and technology infrastructure. The study could also provide the District with a survey of existing conditions.

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Transportation

- 1. Has the District studied how busing would be affected?** Sophisticated, GPS assisted routing software has allowed the District to run bus route models. To ensure that students are not on buses for unreasonable periods of time, it would be necessary to add one bus to the HWRSD fleet of 38. Current projections show that the average route to the WMS site would be about 33 minutes. The average route to the TWB site would be about 37 minutes.
- 2. Has the District studied traffic flow and parking at each site?** The feasibility study described above needs to examine this issue in greater depth. There is sufficient parking at each school, but it may be necessary to create new bus lanes, drop off lanes and parking arrangements.

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Planning, Review and Approval

- 1. What public bodies need to approve the consolidation?** A majority of the School Committee, and voters at each town meeting would have to approve.
- 2. Why does the approval of consolidation need to go to town meeting?** Consolidating our two middle schools at either site would necessitate a change to the HWRSD Regional Agreement. In 1995, the Regional Agreement established HWRSD as a K-12 region, but it does not allow students below grade 9 to attend school in a town other than the one in which they reside.
- 3. When will this issue come before voters?** It is possible, if the District has compiled all the necessary facts, that this issue could be brought to voters at special town meetings in the fall of 2015.
- 4. What information will the voters have if this matter does go to town meeting?** Before voting, townspeople will know the location of a proposed combined middle school and will be provided with specifics on educational benefits, the associated savings, transportation, staffing and other relevant matters.
- 5. Do other educational solutions require town meeting approval?** No. Only solutions that would alter the Regional Agreement need to be voted on at town meeting. Other school closure proposals or budget reductions scenarios only need the vote of the HWRSD School Committee.
- 6. What happens to any school that is closed?** HWRSD owns Minnechaug. All other school buildings in the two towns are owned by the towns. Neither the Middle School Task Force, nor the School Committee has any authority to decide what would happen to these buildings. The

towns would discuss and determine those outcomes with their respective residents outside of this process.

- 7. What are the next steps?** The Task Force is still at the review, fact-finding and input gathering stage. It will continue to hold regular meetings and informational meetings. A community survey is likely. The Task Force will need to consider the results of the feasibility study described above and make a recommendation to the school committee on next steps.

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