

Mass Association of Regional Schools

Process to

Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions

a. Begin Discussions

You are interested in looking at regionalization and it's coming up in conversations. Maybe members of the Finance Committee in town have spoken with members of the Board of Selectmen, and maybe (hopefully) members of the School Committee have been included in these conversations as well. You have many questions and even some concerns, and you know you need data to inform any decision that you eventually may make. But where do you begin? You can begin right here.

The process to form a new regional school district may take up to three years. The first year is devoted to conversations about the prospect of forming or expanding a region, beginning to collect the necessary data and scheduling meetings where regionalization can be discussed.

The second year of the process is taken up with scheduling and securing votes at Town Meetings to establish a Regional Planning Board so that a formal study of regionalization can occur. During this study phase, if a decision is made to move forward with a positive recommendation, the Planning Board begins to develop a regional agreement and long range plan and schedule public forums that ultimately will lead to a town meeting vote to act on the proposed regionalization plan.

The third year of the process is not required but is recommended. A Transition Period is now allowed under CMR 41.03(5) which may last from six months to a year and a half. During this period, the member districts retain their own school committees while the new regional district elects or appoints its own school committee and superintendent to begin the work needed to assume full control of the regional district. At the conclusion of the transition period, the member districts no longer have their own school committees and the new regional district is fully operational.

In this manual, Phase I addresses the first two years of the process, taking the reader up through the process of Town Meeting Votes, at which time the new region is approved by the

voters or not. If the vote is positive, the second part of the manual (Phase II) will be needed. Phase II of this manual addresses the recommended transition time, which could be a third year of the process. Information contained therein takes the district through the process of becoming a fully functioning independent school district.

So let's begin.

If you have not already included the Finance Committee, Board of Selectmen and School Committee in your informal discussions, add them to the group now. The School Committee could take the lead and bring in the Finance Committee and Select Board. As you begin to meet more formally and include more members in your meetings, make sure you comply with Open Meeting Law regulations regarding posting the meeting if any of the departments will have a quorum present at the meeting. Someone should be identified as responsible for keeping track of the data collected and what was discussed, as this information will be needed later on.

Open and honest discussions with all stakeholders will only make this process a success, no matter if the outcome is regionalization, collaboration without governance, or a combination of effort.

Several important questions need consideration during this early part of the process, such as what are the strengths of your district and what are the areas where you are not strong? . In Appendix F, we have included a “Self-Assessment Tool to Measure District Capacity” that was developed by the Legislative Commission on School District Collaboration and Regionalization. We recommend that you use this tool to assess your strengths as a district and areas needing improvement. It can help you determine what issues need to be addressed in your school system, such as do you have declining enrollment, facility or financial issues or are you struggling to maintain appropriate programs for your students? Are you part of an existing region and looking to expand grade levels or to formalize an existing affiliation such as a tuition arrangement or superintendency union? Do you have a partnering district in mind? When considering regionalization, school districts often seek alliances with other like-district partners. In most cases, geographic location becomes the initial jumping off point, but then districts examine and begin to identify other similarities.

Four state organizations can provide you with important data for your district and town. We recommend that you review the information provided on the following websites:

- The M.I.S.C. (Management Information for School Committees) from the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) at: <http://www.masc.org>. under Publications

- The D.A.R.T. (District Analysis and Review Tool) from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE): (See Appendix D)
- Enrollment projections from the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) at: <http://www.massschoolbuildings.org>.
- Department of Revenue Municipal Data Bank. <http://www.mass.gov/dor/local-officials/municipal-data-and-financial-management/data-bank-reports/>.

Combining data gleaned from these sources with information from internal resources will better inform your future decisions. As you begin this process, one of the most important tasks you will face is to “uncover the questions.” Let's examine the five topic areas that generate the most common questions concerning regionalization.

Question 1: Academics

Review your existing Educational Plan, and see where you want to make changes and improvements. Assess your programmatical priorities and focus. Do your potential partners have a similar perspective? Consider factors such as four-year and five-year graduation rates, college placement rates, AP scores and course offerings, and MCAS and AYP status that are relevant to **your** discussion. How have you articulated your educational philosophy across your curriculum? Examine what you believe are your strengths and challenges. Consider whether these factors align with the districts with which you might want to explore the question of regionalization in greater detail. Review the assessments your district utilizes currently, with an eye to what works well and what your educational community might want to add, modify or remove. Does your current configuration limit the breadth of educational opportunities in the classroom and access to extracurricular activities that could create a better learning experience? The design of your class day and year, as well as potential partners, needs to be understood. Do they align, and if not, are there philosophical differences that would conflict? What are your community beliefs regarding "user fees?" Do your neighbors hold these priorities? Press clippings from previous debates can reveal many answers. There are also opportunities to explore if negotiation or compromise can be found.

Question 2: Quality of Programs and Services

Are there programs or services you wish you could be providing to your students? Have you seen these programs in neighboring communities? You may discover your neighbors covet programs and services that you offer. Will consolidation of administrative/central office personnel and services afford greater supervision, direction and flexibility that could benefit

student learning? Pursuing the conversation could lead to an expansion of services that will benefit all of your students.

Question 3: Technology

The most effective place to start looking at technology is to review your most recently submitted Technology Plan, submitted annually to DESE. Are you meeting your instructional and administrative technology needs? What technology goals do you have and what are potential obstacles preventing you from achieving your goals? Are the districts you are considering regionalizing with in a similar situation? Do they hold similar priorities in this area? This is an essential area to question as it influences educational instruction and delivery, professional development for faculty and staff, central office functions and potentially building project needs. Understand your stakeholders' needs fully to avoid pursuing the wrong priority.

Question 4: Physical Plant

Next to fiscal challenges, facility issues are the second most common reason districts consider regionalization. Do you face school closures due to declining enrollment, or expansions due to increased program requirements? Can you make better use of your existing school facilities? If you have a major renovation or substantive repairs now or in the near future, MSBA requires you to consider neighboring communities with which to build or consolidate. MSBA has directed much of its funding and focus to districts considering a new or expanded regional school district. The funding crisis has caused everyone to consider opportunities in regionalization that might otherwise have been overlooked.

Question 5: Fiscal Issues

Limited and/or exhausted financial resources at the local level drive most discussions. Districts seek potential district educational partners with similar (or better) fiscal health and long-term stability. Taking a look at Chapter 70 information for each district involved could be helpful. <http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/chapter70/>. If you are considering regionalization, examine a span of time for your district and your prospective partner(s) to better assess the differences between trend and aberration. Gather and review your collective bargaining agreements and then compare them with the M.I.S.C. and D.A.R.T. reports. You can read the actual agreements on-line on the DESE website. Begin to analyze what costs may be associated with consolidating salary and benefit packages between you and future partners.

At the conclusion of this initial discussion (and the many throughout this process), always return to these questions: *Is the learner learning? What can we do to raise student achievement and success?*

This is a good time to reach out to DESE and share with the Department information about the conversations that have taken place and to discuss your timeline. One member of your group should call:

The Office of School Governance
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
781-338-6520

It is important to have DESE officials involved early in the process to provide technical assistance and advice. All proposals for a new or amended regional school district agreements must be approved by all member towns and by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education prior to the December 31 in order for the agreement to become effective the following July 1. It is important to discuss the timeline of your study with DESE. Regional School District Regulations (CMR 41.03) outlines the necessary steps to secure the Commissioner's approval. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr41.html?section=03>.

Contact MARS for Assistance in Regionalization