

## **MARS Meeting**

**at**

**Pathfinder Vocational/Technical High School**

**April 10, 2018**

**9:30 am**

**1. *Welcome and Introductions – Barbara Ripa***

Barbara welcomed members and noted that the meeting is being videotaped.

Gerry Paist (Superintendent Pathfinder Vocational/Technical High School) thanked MARS for coming to Pathfinder every year.

Members introduced themselves.

**2. *Status of State Budget – Barbara Ripa***

The next round of state budget will be out tomorrow. MARS will be prepared with letters to legislators. State Representative Kim Ferguson will put an amendment in, and notes will go out to Superintendents to ask their state representatives to sign onto amendment. If regional transportation reimbursement is 80% or better, MARS will likely not respond. If it's close to 80-85%, Sen. Gobi and Hinds should also be contacted for their input on how the Senate number will end up. There are rumors that the House number will be the final number. MARS is advocating for a percentage that can be relied on year after year so districts can budget accordingly.

**3. *Legislative Update – Barbara Ripa***

At the Legislative Breakfast on Friday, Barbara shared a collection of bills with updates. She will send out the update to the list serve.

**4. *Upcoming MARS Training – Steve Hemman***

a) End-of-Year Report Training – This year, the trainings will take place on June 7 (half-day) and September 12 (full day), along with emails in Summer to help keep Business Offices on track in completing the report. This training is important for Superintendents as well as Business Managers, and a notebook is provided. The cost is \$500.

b) E&D Training – MARS has developed training with Mark Abrahams to serve Superintendents and Business Managers in preparing balance sheets for E&D certification. The trainings will take place on June 13 (half-day) and September 20 (full day).

c) Municipal Financial Assessments – Two consultants from MARS provide a 20+ page report on member town financial details. The cost is \$950/town.

d) It was also suggested that MARS work with DESE to determine which districts have not filed EOYR and/or districts which have exceeded 5% of their budget in E&D.

5. *Challenges Facing Small Rural Regional and Local School Districts and Proposed Solutions*  
*William Cameron – Chair of Berkshire County Educational Task Force*

Berkshire County is comprised of 130,000 people with 32 towns and cities, with Pittsfield as the largest city. There are 19 School Committees serving under 16,000 students. There are 5 regional school districts K-12 with 12 public high schools, including one charter school in Adams and 1 vocational/technical school for the Northern part of county. Between 2000 to 2015, student enrollment declined by 22%. The state K-12 student population declined by 1.7%. The needs of students in Berkshire County are not being met at the secondary level. A committee was formed to look at problems and they held 38 meetings over 2 years. The goal was to have an empirical basis to describe the problems using actual enrollment figures past, present, and future for all districts. The committee also looked at the financial situations of communities. Pittsfield is at levy ceiling so no overrides are possible. There are a number of other towns in the same situation now and will be in the future. Donahue Institute at UMASS Amherst was contracted to perform a study, which was completed in October 2016. Almost all towns/districts met with the group to review the document to determine what needed to be done to provide the best educational solution for students in the county. Student equity is an issue. District Management Group (DMG) developed options and assessed desirability of options weighing educationally optimal, financial feasible, and politically feasible. Five options were considered: 1) doing nothing; 2) having supervisory unions for North/Central/South regions; 3) having a county-wide supervisory union; 4) having 3 large regional school districts; and 5) having a county-wide school district. Supervisory union options did not address educational problems and they would be challenging to oversee. If 3 large regional school districts were considered, the Central region would be the largest with 8000 students and the North and South regions having 4000 students each. In July 2017, the group voted on a proposal for all regional school districts to consolidate to one school district. This option was low on political feasibility but high on the educational support scale. It would provide maximum flexibility with large high schools to offer comprehensive educational programming. School Committee Representatives do not typically like this option because they are elected to look out for one particular district. Business organizations typically think it makes sense but recognize that it is not politically feasible. No recommendation was made on how one large district would be financed or governed. It is all but impossible to have it done with property taxes of 32 different towns. One idea considered with assistance from Sen. Hinds is for a county-wide income tax to pay for the unified school district. It would relieve 50% of the budget burden for towns. There is an upcoming meeting with school committees and legislators. Another factor is MSBA since there is no need to expand school facilities. There is no proposal to close schools but it's known that there are too many high schools, but some schools could be repurposed. There is no governance model proposed because a school committee would be too large with representatives from all 32 towns. If property taxes were used to fund a single regional school district, it would not work with so many town meetings and potentially some towns feeling like it is not their responsibility to fund other town's responsibilities. A county-wide income tax does not affect property and would provide relief for municipal budgets. Berkshire County previously had a county government, and this regional school district would likely just be a fiscal arm and not governing. The task force has no more financial resources but is providing moral support for shared services and collaborations. Adams-Cheshire and North Adams were discussing a shared

superintendent arrangement but it likely will not move forward. The task force had no discussions with MSBA. Another consideration is the need to adhere to one person, one vote. Parent groups may be invested in this change due to boundary lines causing educational inequity. Legislators do not typically want to take the lead on this project, but there would be more legislative support if there was widespread support for a specific plan. MASC are regular attendees and are supportive. Taxes could go up in Berkshire County with a county tax as well as municipal property taxes.

*Michael Buoniconti – Chair of Massachusetts Rural Schools Coalition*

In Massachusetts, rural schools encompass 10% of total student population or 95,000 students, 30% of traditional public school districts, 96 school districts, and 45% of regional school districts. The challenges are declining student enrollment, flat Chapter 70 state education aid, and rising operating costs (average 2%). Twenty-five school committees have voted to join MA Rural Schools Coalition. The State Auditor study showed a lack of economies of scale for rural districts, and the DESE report highlighted concerns for rural schools as well. The Rural Schools Coalition has 2 strategies: 1) establish rural school aid to increase revenue, and 2) create platform to share services to control expenses. The state should have shared services authority to get part-time services for districts. There is an FY19 proposal to establish rural school aid based on density factor and per capita income and Sen. Hinds is drafting a budget proposal based on structure within Ch. 70 formula with three tiers of rural schools receiving a varying amount of aid. One suggestion was to keep Rural Aid out of Chapter 70 funding so that it will not disappear in the future. The Rural Schools Coalition is also trying to generate new funding streams by supporting the hiring of grant writing services to target competitive rural education grants. The group is hoping to partner with UMASS Amherst to research data to identify trends and individual shared services opportunities. Their next meetings are on 4/23 at Mohawk, and Day on the Hill on 4/25.

6. *Regional Transportation Advocacy - Michael Morris – Superintendent of Amherst Pelham RSD*  
Regional districts give up autonomy of governance but the benefit is regional transportation reimbursement. Budget amendments are based on advocacy so we need good advocacy. Phone calls are better than emails but emails are better than nothing. There is a big grassroots effort around regional transportation now. For new potential districts, there is little incentive to regionalize, especially since regional transportation is not consistent. Predictability of regional transportation reimbursement is needed for districts to be able to plan better. Members mostly agreed that 100% is really not feasible, but 85% is more feasible. One thought is to advocate for 100% and settle for 80%. It was also noted that the regional school districts pay fully for special education transportation and anything less than 1.5 miles, so even 100% reimbursement does not fully reimburse all transportation costs.

The next meeting is May 8 at Assabet, which will be a general meeting followed by a board meeting.

Adjournment at 11:31am.

Respectfully submitted,  
Stacey Jackson  
MARS Consultant