

TTU Regionalization Feasibility Study

Why Consider Regionalization Now?

- The question of whether to regionalize has been raised roughly every 10 years since the Tri-Town Union (TTU) was formed. The issue was last raised as a part of the succession plan for the previous TTU Superintendent
 - At that time, it was decided that strengthening the TTU was the correct course of action
- In 2021, the TTU School Committee voted to investigate the feasibility of regionalization. A grant for \$100,000 was procured to fund this process. This grant expires on June 30th of this year. The Select Boards and School Committees of Boxford, Middleton, and Topsfield voted to approve the formation of a Regional Planning Committee (RPC).
- During 2021, the TTU School Committee voted to hire a consulting firm (the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools - MARS) to study the feasibility of regionalization. MARS has aided the RPC with evaluating and reporting on the potential benefits and drawbacks of regionalization.

What is the Regionalization Planning Committee?

Per state statute, districts that are considering regionalization must first convene a Regional Planning Committee (RPC). The RPC is comprised of three members of from each town and:

- Must include one sitting member of each town's school committee
- Must be appointed by that town's moderator

The TTU's Regionalization Planning Committee members are:

Boxford: Barbara Bisceglia (SC member), Chuck Costello, Dan Volchok

Middleton: Michelle Aitken (SC member), Roger Bourgeois, Kosta Prentakis

Topsfield: Andrew Prazar (SC member), Jessica Steffens, Stephen Whelan

Current TTU Structure

The Tri-Town Union is a superintendency union comprised of three separate elementary school districts (Boxford, Middleton, and Topsfield) that share a central administrative office.

The three districts are governed by independent school committees that retain sole oversight over their district's budgets, programs, policies, staff contracts, and facilities.

The Tri-Town Union School Committee is a nine-member committee comprised of three members of each town's school committee and oversees the budget of the superintendent's office and associated central office staff.

How would a region be different?

The exact structure and governance of the region would be dependent on the regional agreement and policies implemented by that new new district school committee. In general, in a regional district:

- Local control over programs, staff contracts, and policies would shift to a regional school committee.
- The district's budget would be approved by the new regional committee. Individual school budget decisions would be subject to the provisions created within the regional agreement.
- Town representation would shift from the current model of 5 elected representatives per town school committee to a to-be-determined number of members of a regional school committee.
- Teachers and staff would be subject to one, unified contract.

The RPC's work to date

The TTU RPC first convened in the summer of 2022 and has been working with the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools consulting group to research the potential advantages and disadvantages of regionalization. The TTU RPC has identified the following four priorities as the lenses through which to examine the issue:

- Educational outcomes
- Financial impacts
- Improved operational efficiency
- Governance

Educational Outcomes - Potential Benefits

- A more unified programming across all three towns would ensure that students enter Masco with the same educational foundation.
- Having teachers on the same schedule and contract would make sharing resources, knowledge, best practices, and professional development possible.
- The time and resources required to implement new curriculum would be drastically reduced, thus accelerating school improvement.
- A region would allow for the possibility of a cross-town preschool program, which would allow the towns to enroll a higher percentage of applicants.
- With a larger student population to draw from, substantially separate programs for students with special needs could be created. This could potentially keep a greater number of students in-district and with their peers, which improves educational outcomes.
- Given the rapid evolution of skills required in the workplace, a regional district would free up time for the central office staff to accelerate the adoption of new curricula and practices that will prepare students for the future.

Finances - Potential Benefits

- Regional school districts receive a significant reimbursement from the state for transportation. This could be offset by higher expenses. The RPC ran a pro forma analysis based on FY24 transportation reimbursement rates (which vary from year to year) and placing current TTU teachers and staff on the Masco “A” salary scale. Under this “worst case scenario,” each town would spend roughly \$150,000 less on the elementary schools during the first year of the region than they currently do.
- By developing specialized programming within the district, there is the possibility that costly out-of-district student placements would decrease.

Central Office - Potential Benefits

- Due to larger cohorts of student with special needs, there is the possibility of establishing full-time specialized teaching positions that are currently part-time. These staff are hard to hire and retain, and are often filled with expensive contracted staff.
- Time that is currently spent navigating the inefficient TTU system could be put towards researching, implementing, and supporting further school improvements. By increasing efficiency through regionalization, the central office would be able to dedicate more time to supporting teaching and learning.
- A region would allow the district to facilitate teacher movement between schools, which could lead to greater staff flexibility and retention.

Governance

- The RPC would need to determine the following during the drafting of a regional agreement
 - The number of regional school committee representatives from each town and how they are elected or appointed
 - The voting structure of the regional school committee
 - The assessment method (standard v. alternative)
 - How school buildings and infrastructure are maintained and paid for

Potential Drawbacks

- Budgetary decisions that impact programs and staffing would shift from a local school committee to the regional school committee.
- School-specific programming would need to be reviewed to ensure that educational opportunities are equitably distributed throughout the district.
- Currently, each town negotiates separate contracts with teachers and instructional staff in that town's district. Under a regional agreement, a new, unified contract would need to be negotiated with all bargaining units. It is likely that salaries, the major driver of a school's budget, would increase as a part of these negotiations.
- The district budget would need approval from two-thirds of the member towns, or from all three towns, depending on the assessment method in the regional agreement.

What steps need to be taken to form a region?

- The RPC meets with town boards and public to solicit feedback.
- The RPC meets to discuss feedback.
- The RPC considers whether to pursue a regional agreement.
- The RPC drafts a regional agreement.
- The RPC presents the draft agreement to the community, various stakeholders (select boards, finance committees, etc.), and the state.
- The RPC revises the draft as necessary and approves the final agreement.
- The agreement is presented at all three town meetings and must be passed in all three towns.
- The agreement is then approved by the Commissioner of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Where we go from here

- The RPC holds their meetings on the third Thursday of each month. These meetings are open to the public.
- During their meetings, the RPC will discuss any feedback they have received from the community about this process.
- The RPC will continue to debate the benefits and drawbacks of regionalization with a vote as to whether or not to move forward with drafting a regional agreement hopefully occurring no later than the end of this school year.

Questions?

If you'd like to provide written feedback, please email your school committee representative who sits on the RPC.

Boxford: Barbara Bisceglia- bbisceglia@boxfordschools.org

Middleton: Michelle Aitken - maitken@middletonps.org

Topsfield: Andrew Prazar- aprazar@topsfieldps.org