

[Mohawk Trail, Hawlemont districts launch Phase 2 of sustainability study](#)

By BELLA LEVAVI, Staff Writer Published: 02-03-2024 5:40 PM

As part of an effort to find ways to reorganize to better address the hardships faced by rural schools, the Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont regional school districts have initiated Phase 2 of a sustainability study led by educational resource company BERK12.

“The focus in Phase 2 examines all the data we have and identifies the data we need,” Sheryl Stanton, superintendent of the Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont districts, said in an interview. “We will have conversations with the community and staff about any changes and strategies we have that will lead us to sustainability in the district.”

This work is fully funded by a Massachusetts Community Compact grant.

To start Phase 2, the districts established an advisory committee that includes representation from all member towns. With that task complete, they will consider the districts’ existing conditions and chart out initial community engagement until May.

“We are excited about the steering committee,” Stanton said. “They represent each town in the region. They represent a combination of parents, staff, community members and town officials.”

From this initial steering committee, other subcommittees may emerge in the future. One potential subcommittee could address diversity, equity and inclusion in the district.

In recent history, the two districts have faced level enrollment, level state aid and increasing expenses, placing the burden of funding the schools largely on the towns. This prompted the districts to embark on a multi-phase sustainability study to find ways to reorganize the schools and address rural hardships.

In the past, the state’s solution to increasing costs has been to regionalize further. Stanton argued that Mohawk Trail, now the largest district in the state geographically covering more than 250 square miles, cannot regionalize any more. She asserts that Mohawk Trail and Hawlemont need this sustainability study to explore different solutions.

One example of rural hardship is transportation for students with physical and developmental disabilities requiring special education. Many of these students need to travel long distances to schools that are equipped to offer specialized help. Stanton explained that due to the rural nature of the area and the lengthy distances students must travel, transportation costs for these students can be twice as much as their education itself. While education costs for special education are reimbursed by the state, transportation for these students is not.

Phase 1 of the sustainability study, led by the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools, focused on collecting foundational data and was not tasked with making recommendations for

the district. Phase 2 will attempt to find ways to organize differently to achieve efficiency and provide the kind of education the community wants.

Phase 2 will create feasible models for potential reorganization. In the next phase, the districts will take the work a step further and figure out how to implement the suggestions. For instance, Stanton suggested it might make sense to consider bringing certain grade levels in the elementary schools to Mohawk Trail Regional School. In Phase 2, that possibility will be explored, and in Phase 3, an organization will determine what amendments to the regional agreement are needed to make such a change happen.

“Phase 3 would basically work to make any of those adjustments come to life,” Stanton explained.

Per its timeline for the next year, BERK12 will examine data across several functional domains (finance, educational quality, enrollment, buildings, etc.) and generate a range of options and opportunities during the summer. From August through February 2025, they will model and evaluate options. From when that is completed to June 2025, they will develop a final report and plan for the next steps.

Stanton mentioned there is significant work being done in the state Legislature to advocate for more funding for rural schools. While she acknowledged that more aid is one aspect that would help rural schools, she emphasized that more flexibility around programming also needs to take place to bring about substantive change in rural districts.

“Understanding the stressors and solutions for rural districts need to be different than solutions for urban and suburban districts. This is the first step,” Stanton said.

For updates on the sustainability study, visit 2districts8towns.org.

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