

SUMMARY OF RATIONALE FOR PROPOSED MTRSD REGIONAL AGREEMENT AMENDMENTS 2024

Background

These amendments were originally proposed for town approval at 2023 Annual Town Meetings (ATMs). Per the Mohawk Trail Regional Agreement, passage of proposed amendments requires the unanimous approval of all District towns. Based on DESE precedent, town approvals are good for one year.

At Spring 2023 ATMs, 5 towns approved the amendments (Ashfield, Buckland, Charlemont, Colrain and Hawley); 2 towns voted “no” (Heath and Shelburne); and 1 town (Plainfield) voted to pass over the amendments pending further review and consideration at a subsequent Special Town Meeting (STM). Based on these results, the MTRSD School Committee requested that Shelburne and Heath reconsider their ATM votes at a STM. Shelburne did so and approved the amendments in October 2023; Heath decided not to hold a STM for this purpose. Based on Heath’s decision, Plainfield decided not to hold its planned STM.

At the Shelburne STM, concern was raised regarding the wording of the proposed Section IV.B.(2). In response, the School Committee voted to revise the wording of that sentence, and that revision is included in the proposed articles.

Rationale for the Changes

Despite the length of the proposed articles, the purpose of the amendments is simple and straightforward:

- Massachusetts law provides that all towns are financially responsible for the costs of educating all town students who attend public schools, regardless of the school those students attend. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) uses the term “Foundation Enrollment” to define and count those students. In addition to students attending their local school, this term includes students who attend school in another district via “school choice”; students enrolled in charter schools; and students placed out of district in special education programs.
- DESE uses Foundation Enrollment as the basis for allocating state aid to municipalities and regional districts, as well as in determining the minimum amounts school districts must spend on education, and in calculating the minimum amounts towns must pay toward educating their students (minimum required contribution).

Under Mohawk Trail’s current Regional Agreement, town assessments (beyond the required minimum contribution) are based on a rolling 5-year average of the number of students from the town **who attend Mohawk Trail District schools**.

- When the District’s Regional Agreement was first created, all town students attended their local public school; however, today students might attend a charter school, “choice” to another district public school, or require placement in an out-of-district special education program.
- These students are not currently counted in determining their town’s assessment. Instead, the District as a whole pays the tuition for these students - \$5,000

(minimum) for a “choice” student, about \$25,000 for a charter student, and higher amounts for tuitions to specialized schools. The District also pays for transportation to out-of-district special education programs.

- As a result, all district towns share the costs for all of these students, even though the law provides that their town of residence is “financially responsible.”

Under the proposed amendments, the District would begin to use Foundation Enrollment as the basis for capital assessments and for the “above minimum” portion of operating assessments, just as the state uses Foundation Enrollment in calculating the “required minimum” portion of those assessments. Foundation Enrollment is not a new concept. It is used by DESE, by all municipal school districts and by many regional districts in the state.

The fundamental rationale for this change is that it makes town assessments more fair and equitable because the towns that should be financially responsible for their students will have that responsibility reflected in its District assessments, and that responsibility will no longer fall on all of the other towns.

NOTE: A town’s vocational students are NOT included, as town’s are assessed separately for these students. Also not included are students who are home-schooled or who attend private schools.