

**Town of Holden
Holden Education Options Review Committee (EORC)
Final Report**

June 2017

Members of Holden Education Options Review Committee:

**Susan Sullivan, Chair
Brian Allen, Vice-chair
Liam Dempsey, Secretary
Christopher Larsen
Lauren Salmon-Garrett
Kristin Turner**

**Thomas Curran, Ex-officio, Wachusett Regional School District Committee
Timothy Ethier, Ex-officio, Holden Board of Selectmen**

With assistance from:

**Darryll McCall, Superintendent of Schools, Wachusett Regional School District
Joseph Scanlon, Director of Business & Finance, Wachusett Regional School District**

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FINAL REPORT

Introduction

The Holden Board of Selectmen established a committee to review possible options for the funding of the Holden schools. The charge of the Committee follows:

The Board of Selectmen hereby creates the Education Options Review Committee.

PURPOSE: *The purpose of the Education Options Review Committee (the “EORC” or “Committee”) is to review the current state of Holden’s educational funding, staffing and quality in the Wachusett Regional School District (“WRSD” or the “District”) and to provide the Town various possible options designed to offer the children of Holden the best educational opportunities available.*

Additionally, the EORC will develop a report designed to provide the Board of Selectmen, Town Manager and residents of Holden various options for delivering the best and most effective education possible to the children of Holden. The report will include costs and benefits associated with implementing various recommendations, along with a current state analysis.

FUNCTIONS: *The Committee will meet regularly to review and analyze data, meet with appropriate persons, develop a cost benefit analysis and discuss various options in order to develop and present a comprehensive written report to the Board of Selectmen.*

The Committee will reach out and meet with Town boards, committees, citizens, WRSD administration and professionals, and others as needed to receive input, comment and assistance to encourage their participation in the development of recommendations to be submitted in the report.

The Committee shall hold ample public meetings to receive input on the activities and plans.

The Committee will keep the Board of Selectmen and Town Manager apprised of their activities, solicitations, and expenditures.

The Chair of the EORC will be required to submit a final report to the Board of Selectmen and Town Manager that will summarize the results of the Committee's research and include any proposals or recommendations based on the Committee's work.

DUTIES: *Meetings: The Committee shall maintain proper records of their meetings and shall notify the Town Clerk in accordance with the applicable Annotated Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts at least 48 hours prior to the scheduling and commencement of any meetings. Meetings shall be open to the public and allow for appropriate public input.*

ORGANIZATION: *The EORC shall consist of five members appointed by the Board of Selectmen who shall serve for the duration of the project representing the following:*

5 Members from the Public at Large

1 Ex-Officio Member of the Board of Selectmen

1 Ex-Officio Holden Member of the WRSC

The Committee shall organize and select a chairman and other officers as it sees fit.

Members of the Committee may be removed with notice for: (a) undue absenteeism (b) no longer residing in the Town of Holden (c) prolonged illness.

The Board of Selectmen sought volunteers from the community, held interviews in public sessions and chose the following Committee:

Brian Allen

Liam Dempsey

Christopher Larsen

Laura Puleo (later withdrew from the Committee)

Lauren Salmon-Garrett

Susan Sullivan

Kristin Turner

Thomas Curran, Ex-officio, Wachusett Regional School District Committee

Timothy Ethier, Ex-officio, Holden Board of Selectmen

At the first organizational meeting, Susan Sullivan was elected Chair, Brian Allen, Vice-chair, and Liam Dempsey as Secretary. The Committee has followed all provisions of the Open Meeting Law and has approved minutes, which, once approved, have been filed with the Holden Town Clerk.

Brainstorming Activity

The Committee began its work with a brainstorming activity. Members were encouraged to suggest any and all possible ideas regarding funding for the Holden schools. Suggestions could be to change the current funding practices or to find mechanisms to provide additional funds, should the Town Meeting approve additional funds.

The following excerpt from the minutes of the November 16, 2016 meeting summarizes the activity:

- Changing the Wachusett Regional School District Agreement
- The possibility of de-regionalizing Holden students
 - Pre-K to 12th grade
 - Pre-K to 8th grade
- Petitioning the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to change how the school district is funded
 - For example, basing it on overall population rather than by town could better benefit Holden students as they represent the largest percentage of the district's student body
- Offering mini-grants to teachers
- Spending more money on schools from the budget surplus
 - This raised questions as to why use of the surplus has been limited to one-time projects like adding wi-fi to the elementary schools and has been limited to specific areas like technology
- "Enrichment through consultants": using the budget surplus to hire library, art or music consultants that would neither be town or district staff members nor permanent hires
 - Further discussion suggested that if this is not possible through the school district then the committee should investigate whether or not similar enrichment programs can be provided to the children of Holden through the Holden Recreation Department
- Possibility of putting future budget surpluses into an Education Stabilization fund
 - In the instance that the Town of Holden approves the initial school district budget as part of the town's annual budget but the school district budget ends up getting lowered due to less than three of the four other towns in the regional school district not approving the budget
- Reviewing the lease agreements for the schools in town in regards to maintenance of buildings and grounds
 - It was determined that it was up to the superintendent to hire maintenance crews to complete jobs such as spreading mulch at playgrounds. Using this specific example, mulch has been purchased by the district in the past but the district called for parent volunteers to spread the mulch
- The hiring of an education advocate by the town
 - This advocate would review the regional agreement and state funding then act as a resource to the Board of Selectmen and Wachusett Regional School District
 - If the hiring of an advocate as a town employee is not an option then using the budget surplus to hire a one-time consultant to research the practicality and legality of ideas discussed by the EORC and present them to the Board of Selectmen or Wachusett Regional School District
- Universal pre-school for Holden student

- Full-time kindergarten for Holden students
 - This raised the question of whether or not full-time kindergarten could be supported given the current infrastructure of the town's elementary schools
 - The question on infrastructure brought the suggestion that the possibility of an Education Development fund be investigated (similar to the Education Stabilization fund idea) so that future budget surpluses could be used for redevelopment of the town's elementary schools
- Replacing playground equipment at the elementary schools
 - Most if not all of the current equipment is original to when the schools were built
 - Playground equipment is very expensive so it is unlikely that the elementary school PTAs could raise enough money on their own to purchase new playground equipment

Review of the Current Funding via the Wachusett Regional School District

The Committee agreed by consensus to ask Darryll McCall, Superintendent of Schools and Joseph Scanlon, Director of Business & Finance to sit with the Committee to review the current funding of the Holden schools via the Wachusett Regional School District. Chair Sullivan had provided copies of the FY 2017 Budget Information for each member of the Committee to review in anticipation of the Superintendent and Director visit. Kenneth Mills, Chair of the Wachusett Regional School District Committee also attended the meeting. The discussion was very informative and the Superintendent and Director attempted to answer each and every question posed to them.

An important issue, previously discussed by the Committee, was brought to the Superintendent; if the Town of Holden should have excess funds that could be dedicated to the District for the Holden schools, would there be stipulations on the use of the funds. Superintendent McCall answered as follows (excerpt from the December 14, 2016 minutes):

Chair Sullivan asked Dr. McCall for confirmation on whether or not money spent on Holden schools from the budget surplus can only be one-time projects/capital improvements? Chair Sullivan also asked for confirmation on whether or not the town can spend the surplus money on staff for Holden schools.

Dr. McCall noted that those questions had been discussed many times at school committee meetings and that the district and school committee have worked to create avenues that would allow towns to go above and beyond the amount budgeted by the district. This most often takes the form of one-time projects/capital improvements such as the installation of wi-fi currently being undertaken in the Holden elementary schools.

Dr. McCall further noted that any additional spending by an individual town would have to be a donation or a gift and that the school committee would have to approve the donation or gift. As such it would be difficult to "donate" or "gift" a teacher's salary on top of which it is a gift to the school district so it would not be possible to say that the teacher can only work in Holden schools. Mr. Scanlon noted that there would not be any legal difficulties in a town hiring a district staff member presuming they were a union member but the union members from the other district towns may oppose the hiring. Mr. Mills noted that another factor that would need to be considered is that

the cost of hiring a staff member would be recurring and that teacher's salary would need to be paid each year.

Director Scanlon explained the budget process, using the *FY 2017 Budget Information* booklet to help members understand the process. He explained the various funding sources for the District: State funds, local funds, and grants. Since Holden is the largest town in the District, a larger percentage of overall costs from the local towns come from Holden. Committee members agreed to take what was learned from the Superintendent and Director and utilize this information when formulating suggestions and recommendations for the Holden Board of Selectmen.

Review of the Brainstorming Activity & Prioritization of Ideas

The Committee continued its meetings and reviewed all suggestions from the brainstorming activity in November. There was continued discussion regarding the hiring of additional staff, outside of regular staffing provided by the District. Members were reminded how difficult that would be as staffing needs sustained funding and additional funding in one year may not be followed by additional funding in another year. Members were also reminded that the Superintendent would not be in favor of additional staffing for one town and not another. The school district staffs all towns equally and that neither the school district administration nor the school committee would likely approve one town funding a position or positions solely for that town.

The idea of a stabilization fund created by the budget surplus to finance capital improvements or technology was further discussed. It was noted that any type of stabilization fund would need approval by the Board of Selectmen, the Town Manager, the Finance Committee and ultimately the Town Meeting. The Committee decided by consensus that a revolving fund would be a possible recommendation by the Committee.

The idea of Holden leaving the Wachusett Regional School District was discussed. It was decided to focus an entire meeting on review of the Amended Wachusett Regional School District Agreement. In addition to the Agreement, the Committee agreed to review the newly approved Lease Agreement between the Town of Holden and the Wachusett Regional School District, to see if there were any options for use of additional funds through the Lease Agreement.

Review of the Amended Wachusett Regional School District Agreement

The Committee did a thorough review of the Amended Wachusett Regional School District Agreement. Chair Sullivan reviewed the history of the District, first as a 9-12 Regional School District and then the approval by member Towns to amend the District to be Pre-K through Grade 12. This change was voted by the Member Towns in 1994 and has remained the same since that time. In reviewing the Regional Agreement, it was clearly noted that there is a process for an individual town to LEAVE the District but no process for an individual town to leave the District Pre-K through Grade 8 and remaining in the District for the high school (as it was originally).

Chair Sullivan shared with the Committee information from a review done in 1999-2000 by the Task Force to Study the Option of Breaking up the Region, which was composed of representatives from the Member Towns. This Task Force was established during the very contentious "One-School/Two-School High School Debate", which occurred prior to the eventual renovation/addition at the Wachusett Regional High School. The initial discussion of that Task Force was that the

entire District would need to be dissolved and then a new District created, depending on the decisions made by the member Towns. In the end, the Task Force did not recommend the dissolution of the District. It was determined that it would be a very costly process for all Member Towns.

The Committee concluded that, as written, it would be very difficult for Holden alone to leave the District. No members of the Committee wanted to consider leaving the District at the high school level, and there is no viable option in the current Agreement to do so.

Review of the Lease Agreement Between The Town of Holden and the Wachusett Regional School District

The Committee made a cursory review of the newly amended Lease Agreement Between the Town of Holden and the Wachusett Regional School District. It was agreed to suggest to the Board of Selectmen to review Section 5 of the Lease Agreement as a possible opening to allow Holden to provide more funds and/or resources for the maintenance of Holden schools.

Review of the Current State of Holden’s Educational Funding, Staffing, and Quality

The Committee decided to seek information from the administration and teaching staff of the Holden schools, Davis Hill Elementary, Dawson Elementary, Dr. Leroy E. Mayo Elementary, and Mountview Middle Schools. The Committee initially included the high school School Council on its list to visit but was advised by the Superintendent that Wachusett Regional High School students are considered District students and not students from an individual town. He asked that the Committee not seek information at the high school level as collecting data on Holden high school students alone was not feasible. Students entering Wachusett Regional High School are immediately considered District students; this is emphasized to the students at freshman orientation and maintained throughout their high school experience. A series of questions were developed and review by the Superintendent. Initially, the Superintendent had agreed with the process, suggesting that the School Council at each school would be the proper vehicle to ascertain such information. The School Councils include representatives from the school administration, the teaching staff, an ex-officio member of the School Committee, and representatives from the community.

However, as the FY 2018 budget process proceeded, the Superintendent was uneasy with the Committee asking questions about budget when, in all likelihood, the budget would be reduced for 2018. The Members of the EORC decided to proceed and adopted a revised list of questions. School Councils at the elementary and middle school level were provided the questions in advance. A member of the EORC attended each of the School Council Meetings and gathered information. The questions were in three categories: Funding (General Funding Needs, Supply Needs, Technology Needs, and Maintenance Needs), Staffing (General Staffing Needs), and Quality of Education (General Quality of Education Assessment).

School Council Members from each of the elementary schools agreed that technology was a priority in the schools. Smartboards were outdated; Chrome Carts were a great resource, however, the schools needed additional carts. In discussing technology it was made very clear that technology needs training for students and staff. Although Council members felt that the custodians did a good job, there were still maintenance issues. Playgrounds could be updated and maintained better; general maintenance could be improved with increased time for custodians. There was clear realization

that the elementary schools are filled to near capacity and, although a desire, more space is not imminent. This was evident in the answers to staffing needs. Class size is dependent on the availability of classrooms. Already special classrooms are being taken for regular classroom use. Some schools expressed interest in Reading Specialists, Technology Teachers, Librarians, Counselors, and Consultants for training in technology.

Responses to the questions from Mountview Middle School were a bit different. Mountview recognizes that the school received much needed improvements in both the facility and the technology through the construction of the new school. The Council did note, however, that there continue to be staffing needs at the middle school level. They would like to see the health teacher position restored, add additional guidance counselors, and perhaps get a police liaison, similar to the high school. They also see a need for additional custodial staff as the building is larger, both inside and out. Overall, the Council members stressed that there is a high quality of education at Mountview, with a rigorous curriculum.

The overall response to the quality of education for Holden students was excellent. The teachers, administration, and support staff step up to the plate and “do their job” to educate the students with the funds provided. Although the administration praised the staff for providing an excellent education, both the administration and staff at each school expressed frustration regarding the continuing budget struggles each year. Administration and staff are challenged daily with this lack of adequate funding. All members of the School Councils felt that the education of Holden students could be considerably improved if additional funding was provided.

Review of Past Minutes of Holden Pupil Population Study Task Force

The Committee requested information from the Superintendent on the Holden Pupil Population Study Task Force, which was convened in April of 2015 to explore student population issues. The Task Force met regular until September of 2015. The Town of Holden has approved funding for an in-depth population study for the Town of Holden in order to ascertain the need for additional schools and/or additions to current schools. The Superintendent supplied copies of the minutes of the Task Force which has been suspended since May of 2016. The Superintendent advised the Committee that the Task Force will not be re-convened until the population report is finalized by the Town of Holden.

The EORC reviewed the information but agreed by consensus that the population study is critical to the discussion of student population at the elementary and middle school levels.

Recommendations of the Holden Education Options Review Committee

The Committee has completed its work on the review of options for additional funding for the Holden schools. The first recommendation was approved in February and forwarded to the Holden Board of Selectmen in anticipation of possible action at the May 2017 Annual Town Meeting. It was later revised to include additional language. Other recommendations were approved later meetings, as noted below.

Recommendation #1 revised at June 7, 2017 meeting):

The Holden Education Options Review Committee has voted to recommend the establishment of a Holden Education Stabilization or Reserve Fund in accordance with Massachusetts General Laws. Such an established fund would be utilized by the Town of Holden as follows:

If the Holden voters adopt an assessment for the Wachusett Regional School Committee at an Annual Town Meeting in May, as submitted by the Wachusett Regional District School Committee, and such assessment is reduced at a later date by the Regional District School Committee, the difference is automatically transferred to the Holden Education Stabilization or Reserve Fund. The funds in the Holden Education Stabilization or Reserve Fund may be used for such items as capital improvements, technology improvements, playground improvements, new school construction or expansion due to increased population, etc. The determination of use of these funds would be recommended by a Standing Committee and subsequently voted by the citizens of Holden at an Annual or Special Town Meeting.

Recommendation #2 (approved at the May 24, 2017 Meeting):

The Holden Education Options Review Committee has voted to recommend that the option of Holden leaving the Wachusett Regional School District not be considered. However, the Committee further recommends consideration be made to explore the dissolution of the District with some of the other towns. In addition the Committee recommends that the Regional Agreement be reviewed to provide an alternative avenue for a Member Town to leave the District for Pre-K through Grade 8 and remain in the District for Grades 9-12.

Recommendation #3 (approved at the May 24, 2017 Meeting):

The Holden Education Options Review Committee has voted to recommend that the Lease Agreement Between the Town of Holden and the Wachusett Regional School District, Section 5, as a possible opening to allow Holden to provide more funds/resources to provide for the maintenance of Holden schools.

Recommendation #4 (approved at the May 24, 2017 Meeting):

The Holden Education Options Review Committee has voted to recommend that Mini-Grants be considered by the Town of Holden to augment the education of Holden students. Such a Mini-Grant Proposal would be established by the Holden Selectboard and/or Holden Town Manager. The procedures would also be developed by the Selectboard and/or Town Manager.

Recommendation #5 (approved at the June 7, 2017 meeting):

The Holden Education Options Review Committee did not attempt an assessment of the quality of education for high school students from Holden, or the potential effects of future budget cuts on high school education for students from Holden. However, there is concern that high school education is being negatively affected by cuts. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Selectboard assess this aspect of the education of Holden students.

Conclusion

The Committee thanks the Holden Selectboard for giving it the opportunity to meet and explore the various options available in order to support the education of Holden students within the Wachusett Regional School District. Should the Selectboard have any further questions regarding this report, feel free to contact the Chair, Susan Sullivan.