

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated 8/2024

Big Question: How do we define educational equity?

We all look at educational equity through different lenses, based largely on our upbringing and life experiences. But for the purposes of the discussions that lie before us, perhaps the best definition comes from the America's Promise Alliance in their [States Leading for Equity](#) publication - a definition that is also endorsed by the Vermont AOE:

"Every student [will have] access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or family income."

We also have the [District Equity Policy](#) which outlines our commitment to educational equity.

Criteria for Decision Making

As we considered the answers to the questions in this document, we kept the following decision making criteria in mind:

1. Class size
2. Support services - nursing/counseling
3. Staff utilization
4. Middle grade program
5. Impact on student well-being
 - Wellbeing cost/benefit analysis
6. Cost/Financial Comparisons
7. Community Health and Identity
8. Sustainability - longer term financial and Capital
9. Potential effects on future merger possibilities w/other schools/districts
10. Transportation
11. Educational benefits

Frequently Asked Questions

The following document will be updated and expanded upon as new questions arise and new information is available.

1. Why can't we slow down this process?

The short answer is: we can, but it could come at a cost. We chose the current timeline (see question 6) for three reasons:

1. It will help us avoid another painful budget increase for FY25 and/or possible budget failure.
2. It will allow us more control over spending.
3. It will allow adequate time for a thoughtful and successful transition.
4. Delaying further will only delay the transition and increase costs in the short run.

2. What are the proposals currently on the table?

1. Move all 6th graders to U-32 and create a true middle school structure for all students in grades 6-8.
2. Consolidate elementary education into 3 schools, located in Middlesex, East Montpelier, and Berlin.
3. Consolidate K-5 education into 2 schools, located in Middlesex and East Montpelier, and create an early childhood education center in Berlin, with the district offering pre-K to all district students there and partnering with an outside group to offer childcare from birth to Pre-K.

Note: We can pursue options 1 and 2 simultaneously. If we choose option 3 we will also pursue moving 6th graders to U-32 to have adequate space.

3. What factors (criteria) did you consider in determining the above proposals?

1. Class size
2. Support services - nursing/counseling
3. Staff utilization
4. Middle grade program
5. Educational benefits (via expanded offerings)

4. Can you tell us what we will save as taxpayers?

Not at this time. We have estimates now, and we will know more definitively how much we will save in local spending after we complete our modeling. (We're working on a side-by-side comparison of FY 25's budget with configuration changes and without configuration changes) We should also be able to tell you soon how our spending might protect the district from big future increases based on a lower baseline and more built-in flexibility. We would love to be able to say how taxes are reduced by our spending reduction in Year 1 and beyond, but no one can make those predictions. **Our budgets reflect our control over local education spending.** But local spending itself is only one of many factors in determining tax rates until the legislature changes the education funding formula.

We can say that, under our current system, decreasing the amount that we spend locally will decrease the local tax rate - both for people who pay the homestead property tax rate and for most people who pay based on their income. Our system uses the local spending per weighted pupil as the starting point for determining the tax rate, so educating the same group of students at a lower cost will in turn reduce taxes.

5. What other options did you consider?

We looked at moving from five to four elementary schools; and/or at building a single elementary school to serve the entire district. The four school option would have met criteria 3, 6 and 8 (i.e. savings in workforce reductions and in building operations), but would not have met other criteria/goals of the reconfiguration work. The one school option - though feasible - did not adequately meet any of the established criteria.

6. What is your timeline for making this decision?

1. Summer 2024: engage the public and gather feedback.
2. September 2024: Decide which option(s) to pursue
3. October 2024: Community discussions on moving forward
4. November 2024: Vote on ballot question for November election
5. FY 2025/26: Implement plan

7. What needs to happen to close a school?

Under our Articles of Agreement, the closure of a school must be approved by the voters of the town in which it is located.

8. What happens to the school building if we stop operating it as a school?

School buildings will first be offered to their host towns, which will have the option of purchasing the building for one dollar. The towns will then be able to use those buildings for other public purposes (e.g. town offices, community or childcare centers, maker spaces, etc).

9. I've heard that reconfiguration is (both) about cost savings and the quality of education. Which is it?

It is both. Reconfiguration meets a number of criteria, but primarily funding a high quality education for all students with a focus on equity, excellence and sustainability; as well as having the ability to carry out our strategic plan for the benefit of all families within our district.

As our enrollment continues to decline (as it is projected to do in the coming years) it will become cost prohibitive (and ultimately impossible) to provide the robust and expansive educational experiences our students deserve. We are already limited in our ability to provide equitable experiences across the system in our current configuration. Taking no action will only accentuate the problem. This past year's budget failure was an indication that we have reached the point where the cost of providing a high quality education has moved beyond many taxpayers' ability and/or willingness to pay for it. We need to find fiscally responsible ways to maintain and grow the programs and curriculum we have.

10. What are the expected cost savings from merging schools?

We currently have preliminary estimates that are very conservative: we have identified some concrete savings, particularly in staffing and building operations. We are working on determining how reconfiguration would impact things like special education.

We have outlined some of these preliminary estimates in the chart on the next page:

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Create 6-8 Middle School | | |
| FTE Reduction | \$530,000 | |
| Reconfigure Elementary Schools | | |
| Factor | 3 Elementary Schools | 2 Elementary Schools + Early Childhood Center |
| Building Operations | \$343,452 | 343,452 |
| Classroom FTE Reduction | \$881,920 | \$987,920 |
| Capital Spending | \$2,673,500 (6 years) \$455,583 annual avg. | \$2,673,500 (6 years) \$455,583 annual avg. |
| Non-Classroom FTE (Principal, nursing, counseling, allied arts) | Unknown at this time | Unknown at this time |
| Additional Unknowns | | Transportation Impacts Potential rent from Early Childhood partner |

11. Why are we discussing this now if we don't know the full financial impact yet?

We know that the following three things are true:

1. We will see significant cost savings from a reconfiguration.
2. We will be able to improve the operations of the schools by reconfiguring.
3. We will have time to get public input on the impacts of the different scenarios that we are considering, independent of the cost impact.

If we wait until we have completed full cost estimates to discuss reconfiguration, we would need to either curtail the public input process or push reconfiguration out further into the future. As we anticipate having more complete cost estimates soon, we believe it is in the district's best interests to do the two in parallel.

12. How much capacity do we currently have?

The individual school capacities and current enrollments are:

| | Classrooms | Student Capacity | Current Occupancy | % of Capacity Addressed |
|--------|------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Berlin | 13 | 336 | 198 | 59% |
| Calais | 9 | 252 | 94 | 37% |
| Doty | 7 | 189 | 78 | 41% |
| EMES | 15 | 413 | 216 | 52% |
| Rumney | 9 | 268 | 122 | 46% |
| U-32 | 55 | 1319 | 708 | 54% |

13. Why aren't we talking about merging the high school with Montpelier and beyond?

We have had initial and informal conversations with Montpelier/Roxbury about potential consolidation, but such a consolidation would be a long (several years) process. It would require creating a new merged district, (i.e. new articles of agreement, board structure, administration structure, etc.) Discussions on that level cannot happen in a timeframe that will address our district's current needs. Also: if we were to merge with another district, (including Barre and/or other Central Vermont districts), reconfiguration with those districts would still be on the table.

Here is a link to the possible process that all communities would need to agree on:
<https://education.vermont.gov/documents/governance-study-committee-worksheet>

Middle School Related Questions:

14. Will moving the 6th graders to U-32 prevent us from merging with other schools in the future?

No. While we have significant capacity to expand (e.g. via a merger), so do other districts. The conversations around which schools to merge and which schools to close would still revolve around reconfiguration.

15. Why move the 6th graders to U-32 when we have lots of space in our elementary schools?

Moving 6th graders to U-32 would allow us to create more of a true middle school; reduce expenses; and provide expanded educational and co-curricular benefits. The resulting increased capacity within our elementary schools, as well as additional cost savings, is one of the drivers for the reconfiguration.

16. Will 6th graders be overwhelmed/lost being mixed with older students at the high school?

This question was of concern to all of us. However, creating a distinct middle school will allow students to create a stronger separate identity, and teachers to focus on specific age group. (Teachers currently teach across the age range). The Middle School will be concentrated in its own area of the school building, which will help to create this separation.

17. Who will be teaching middle school if the 6th graders move up to U-32? Where do the current 6th grade teachers go?

Some current 6th grade teachers may choose to move to the new middle school while some will remain in the elementary schools. Those who move will have to get additional endorsements (middle school licensure) to teach the full middle school range (grades 6-8). Teachers currently serving grades 7-8 will also need these additional endorsements. No teachers with current middle school licensure are expected to take over the middle school teaching at the expense of another group. If approved, administrators will work with affected teachers to help them add the necessary endorsements.

Elementary School Related Questions:

18. What are the educational benefits of combining elementary schools?

There are a number of benefits of combining our smallest schools. These include:

- Class sizes will be more stable and consistent. With very small class sizes [some of our classes have fewer than 5 students], even small fluctuations in attendance; or students moving out of the district; can create challenges for teaching and instruction. When this happens we sometimes have to create grade configurations that either don't make sense or that change from year to year, (e.g. a 1st/2nd configuration one year becomes a 2nd/3rd configuration the following year), creating an inconsistent and educationally unsound experience for students, especially in areas related to science and social studies/global citizenship. In these areas, best practices involve offering a set progression. Changes to grade configurations can make that impossible.
- Opportunities to expand course offerings. We would like to bring world languages back to our elementary schools. Cost savings from reconfiguration could make this possible.
- Expanded opportunities in the arts. In our smallest schools, we are not able to offer a full range of arts programming because these opportunities require a critical mass of students to be viable. Band and chorus are good examples. Both require enough students for the musical arrangements to make sense. In our smallest schools, there aren't enough students to offer such a program. Thus, band and chorus are only available in our larger schools, creating an inequity among students within the district.
- Greater opportunities for high performing students; better experiences for lower performing students. In larger classrooms, it is more likely that students at both levels of ability will have peers who are learning/performing at or near their own levels. This means that higher-performing students can be paired with students at their own level (for example, in reading groups), while students who require extra help may be able to receive that help in small groups as opposed to feeling singled out.
- Ability to better shape class dynamics. In schools with multiple classrooms per grade, teachers and administrators will be able to use class configurations to improve the learning environment for all students, reducing potential disrupting or distracting influences.
- Better learning environment. Greater opportunity for students to engage with peers academically at their level and different levels. In larger classes, students have greater access to peers who learn both similarly to, and differently from, them, creating more options for learning and discovery. Both are important for instructional purposes but are difficult to achieve in very small class sizes.
- Fewer part-time teachers. Our current configuration requires us to employ many of our arts teachers on a part-time basis, and to split their jobs across multiple schools. Larger schools make it easier to support full-time employees, which makes it easier to retain teachers.

- Classes meet minimum class size guidelines. Our school district currently sets a minimum class size for purposes of education quality. We are not currently meeting those minimum class sizes in all of our schools.
- Sustainable nursing and counseling. We want to have nurses and counselors available at all of our schools on a full-time basis. Vermont’s education quality standards call for us to have at least 1 nurse per 500 students and one counselor per 300 elementary school students, making this virtually impossible at our smallest schools.

19. What will happen to the teachers at the schools that are closing? Which teachers will be let go?

Our current teachers’ contract ultimately determines how positions will be filled as defined by seniority and reduction in force language. That said, we believe that with advance planning, we can minimize the impact of reductions and maximize the ability for teachers to move around within the district. While positions at specific schools would be eliminated, which actual teachers would no longer be employed by the district would be determined by the seniority rules in the teachers’ contract.

20. How big will the class sizes be?

Projected class sizes will change as follows:

Numbers represent averages. Current numbers are for FY 2024/25. Projected numbers represent various configurations in FY 2025/26.

In some cases we expect to see very little change in average class size because combining schools will offset decreasing enrollment.

If we move to 3 elementary schools:

| Location | K-3 | 4-6 | K-3 | 4-5 |
|-------------|---------|-----------|-----------|------|
| Current | Current | Projected | Projected | |
| Berlin | 15 | 19 | 15 | 16 |
| East Mntplr | 20 | 18 | 16 | 19 |
| Rumney | 15 | 14 | 16.5 | 21.5 |

If we move to 2 elementary schools:

| Location | K-3 | 4-6 | K-3 | 4-5 |
|-------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----|
| Current | Current | Projected | Projected | |
| East Mntplr | 20 | 18 | 16 | 25 |
| Rumney | 15 | 14 | 16 | 17 |

21. What will happen with multi-age classrooms?

TBD based on community input and need. Larger classrooms will allow us to be more intentional about using them in situations that make sense and result in a well-planned progression (versus using them to address fluctuations in enrollment).

22. Have you considered bringing in other community organizations to use the buildings while continuing to operate them as schools as an alternative to closing the schools?

The two primary goals of reconfiguration are improving educational opportunities, outcomes and equity; and reducing and/or containing costs. While bringing outside organizations into the school buildings may reduce some overhead costs, it would not address savings in teaching, administration, and support staff FTEs. It may also negatively impact the delivery of educational and co-curricular services.

In looking at this possibility, it was determined that Doty and Calais would each have to bring in more than \$30,000 per month in rental income to offset only the operations costs and planned capital spending for these buildings. This also does not address the resource-intensive responsibilities of providing landlord-type services to organizations who may wish to rent space.

23. What will reconfiguration mean for kids socially?

Students who will be switching schools will do so with their peers, which will help mitigate any uncertainty around moving to a new environment. Students will also have new and additional social opportunities to meet new friends and acquaintances. Larger classrooms per grade will also help teachers and administrators shape the dynamics of individual classrooms. When school populations can only support one class, students who have trouble being in class together are often stuck together for multiple years.

24. How will this affect higher and lower performing students?

We address this question in the bullet points under question 18.

25. How will this affect programming in the arts?

We expect to be able to provide more arts offerings to our students, particularly those currently at our smallest schools. All students currently have art and music classes, but not all have access to band and chorus. [see question 18, bullet points 2 and 3].

26. We talk about equity a lot in how we want to operate our schools. Is it equitable that we're talking about closing our two smaller schools in our district?

[This also addresses the “big question” at the beginning of this document: How do we define educational equity?]

The concept of equity is subjective. Our role is to encourage, pursue, and define equity in a way that benefits the most students educationally and socially. Under our current configuration, our smallest schools are not able to offer students everything that our larger ones can. Smaller schools also are forced (at times) to use sub-optimal class configurations. While there is evidence that students benefit from attending smaller schools, in all of our proposed configurations, all of our schools remain small. We believe our students will continue to have the benefits of attending a small school, while gaining the benefits of having the economies of scale to offer increased services, programming and greater stability.

27. Are there things that we do not offer now that reconfiguration will allow us to offer?

We used to offer Spanish at all of our elementary schools, and that has slowly been cut back for budgetary reasons with the last remaining program being cut this year. Given the world our children will be inheriting, we would like to be able to offer a robust world language program beginning at the elementary level. Consolidating schools may give us the ability to do that.

28. What will happen to school identity?

We will need to rebrand our district as a whole. We will create new identities for the merged schools – they will not simply be the old schools with additional students. We will need to have a larger sense of community and use the opportunity to dream together; renaming schools and selecting new mascots so that all students feel that this is “their school.” We also expect to see a shifting of staff, so while the buildings will be the same buildings that existed as the town elementary schools, they will operate as new entities.