

Athens-Grafton School District

Grafton Elementary School Study

DY Consulting LLC | Prepared for the Athens-Grafton School Board

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I. Executive Summary

The Athens-Grafton School Board commissioned this study to evaluate the future of Grafton Elementary School and determine whether the current K-6 model should continue, be redesigned, or transition to another structure. The analysis considered student experience, enrollment, achievement, staffing, finances, transportation, community context, neighboring schools, and recent Vermont school reconfiguration cases.

Grafton Elementary has clear strengths. Students are known well by adults, staff work closely together, families value the individual attention available in a small setting, and the school benefits from a distinctive place-based environment. Academic results are mixed but generally improving. Literacy outcomes have strengthened across VT-CAP, DIBELS, and MAP measures, while mathematics remains more uneven.

The central challenge is scale. Enrollment has fallen to approximately 26 students across seven grades in 2025-2026, with 19 students reported for 2026-2027. There is no projected enrollment recovery through FY29. Very small cohorts limit peer interaction, instructional grouping, academic challenge, enrichment, extracurricular opportunity, and staffing flexibility. These limits grow more pronounced as students get older.

The district has already reduced and restructured costs. Staffing expenses have declined, positions have been shared or contracted, and the overall budget has remained relatively constrained despite rising facilities and special education costs.

The financial implications of restructuring are real. Closure or major reconfiguration would reduce direct elementary operating costs, though replacement tuition, transportation, special education, governance, and other district responsibilities would continue. Any savings estimate must account for those continuing obligations and the future of the Town-owned building.

Athens and Grafton would also experience structural change differently. Transportation, family access, geography, and community connection vary between the two towns. Any future model should be tested separately for its effect on each community rather than assuming one receiving-school arrangement will serve both equally well.

The study also found a gap between the school's internal professional culture and its relationship with portions of the parent and broader community. Some families describe very positive experiences, while others report reduced trust and weaker connections to the school. Leadership transition creates both risk and an opportunity to rebuild those relationships.

Four future pathways were evaluated:

Maintain the current K-6 model. This preserves continuity and the school's strongest relational advantages, but it does not address the long-term pressures created by enrollment, scale, staffing, and cost.

Redesign Grafton Elementary as a differentiated school. A clearer outdoor, place-based, early-childhood, or regional role could build from existing strengths, but the model would need to demonstrate actual demand, partner support, and financial viability.

Regionalize part of the educational program. A local-primary/regional-intermediate model is the strongest preservation-oriented option identified in the study. It could preserve local access and the relational and place-based strengths of Grafton's small setting for younger students while giving older students broader peer, instructional, and extracurricular opportunities.

Transition to a non-operating or receiving-school model. This provides the strongest long-term response to enrollment, scale, staffing, and financial sustainability if no preservation-oriented alternative can be made viable. It also carries the greatest community, transportation, and transition consequences.

Report Recommendations

This report recommends that the Board carefully analyze two potential pathways that preserve an educational footprint at the Grafton Elementary School. Those two pathways are not assured to be feasible or successful, but they should be considered and explored.

The Board's next immediate step should be a short, defined, time-sensitive feasibility process considering two pathways:

- Partial regionalization
- Differentiated redesign

These two pathways should be tested against a common set of conditions:

- educational quality and opportunity
- sustainable enrollment or grade configuration
- partner commitment
- transportation and access
- staffing
- recurring cost
- governance feasibility.

If neither pathway meets all of the required common conditions, the district should move toward a planned non-operating or receiving-school structure that addresses receiving schools,

transportation, student support, special education continuity, staffing, family enrollment, and building use before implementation.

Overall timeframe for next steps:

September 1 2026	Begin pathway feasibility analysis
October 1 2026	Final determination of feasibility. Either proceed developing one pathway for July 2027 start date, or move to non-operation discussions and community engagement process to inform Board decisions.
December 15 2026	Board decisions made regarding non-operation recommendation.
January 2027	Warn Town Meeting language for any Board proposal if necessary
March 2027	Town Meeting vote on any Board proposal

II. Purpose, Scope, and Process of the Study

The Athens-Grafton School Board commissioned this study to examine the future of Grafton Elementary School and provide an independent basis for considering whether the current K-6 operating model should continue, be redesigned, or transition to another structure.

The study examined the school through several connected lenses: student experience and educational opportunity, enrollment and demographics, achievement, staffing and student support, financial sustainability, transportation and access, community connection, and the feasibility of alternative educational models. The work also considered the different implications of change for Athens and Grafton.

Information gathering included school observation; interviews with Board members, administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and other community members; parent group listening opportunities; a joint discussion with School Board and Selectboard representatives; and a public Community Forum. It also included review of enrollment, achievement, staffing, transportation, and financial information; comparison with neighboring schools; and review of recent Vermont school closure and reconfiguration cases.

The analysis was organized around a common set of criteria so that future pathways could be evaluated on the same basis:

- educational opportunity
- student support and belonging
- academic challenge
- peer and social opportunity
- equity and access
- transportation
- resilience to low enrollment
- financial sustainability
- staffing stability
- community impact
- implementation feasibility
- adaptability to state reform.

The study is intended to support Board decision-making rather than substitute for it. Its purpose is to establish the conditions facing the district, identify the strengths and limitations of the current model, evaluate realistic alternatives, and provide a course of action grounded in the evidence collected during the study.

III. Current Conditions

A. Enrollment and Demographic Context

Grafton Elementary School operates as a K-6 school across seven grade levels. Enrollment stood at approximately 26 students in 2025-2026, with 19 students reported for 2026-2027. Several grade cohorts contain only a handful of students, making both total enrollment and grade-level distribution central to evaluating the current model.

The enrollment decline reflects a longer-term pattern. Enrollment projections available to the district do not show a recovery through FY29, and stakeholder input consistently pointed to demographic conditions unlikely to change quickly: an aging population, limited housing affordable to families with children, few young families entering the community, and low numbers of younger children expected to enter the school system.

Exhibit 1. Grafton Elementary Enrollment and Scale

Measure	Current Condition
Current K-6 enrollment	19 to 26 students, depending on the school year
Grade span	Kindergarten through Grade 6
Number of grade levels	7
Typical cohort size	Several grades contain only a handful of students
Enrollment outlook	District projections show no recovery through FY29
Historical direction	Enrollment has declined substantially from earlier levels

A complete historical enrollment series suitable for a year-by-year trend chart was not available for the study. The study therefore relies on the current enrollment, available projections, and the broader historical decline documented through district information and stakeholder input.

Housing is a particularly important factor. Grafton's attractiveness as a community and the strength of its housing market have not translated into higher enrollment. Rising property values, second-home ownership, and limited family-oriented housing make it increasingly difficult for younger households to establish themselves in town. Athens faces a similar demographic outlook, though its economic and geographic circumstances differ somewhat.

Enrollment is also shaped by the educational choices families make. Several stakeholders estimated that a number of school-aged children in Grafton are currently homeschooled, and some families have chosen private or other educational settings. The precise number and reasons vary. These choices are not the primary explanation for the school's enrollment decline, but they confirm that the number of resident school-aged children and the number attending Grafton Elementary are not the same figure.

Some community members believe families from neighboring communities might choose Grafton Elementary if broader enrollment options were available. That possibility deserves consideration

in a future redesign analysis, but the study has not identified documented demand sufficient to conclude that expanded choice would materially reverse the school's enrollment trajectory.

Exhibit 2. Evidence of Very Small Grade Cohorts

Available enrollment and testing information consistently shows that Grafton Elementary students are distributed across seven grade levels in very small cohorts. MAP testing rosters from 2025-26 ranged from approximately one to six participating students per grade, depending on grade and subject.

These testing counts are not official enrollment figures and should not be treated as such. Their value is limited to confirming the scale condition documented throughout the study: several grade cohorts contain only a small number of students.

B. Educational Program and Student Experience

Grafton Elementary operates with the advantages and constraints of a school with very small scale. Students are known well by adults, relationships are close, and staff describe a strong internal culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. Several educators emphasized their ability to respond quickly to individual student needs, adjust instruction, and work across traditional role boundaries. Parents who described positive experiences at the school pointed to the same things: personal attention, flexibility, and a strong sense of connection.

The school also benefits from a distinctive setting and a number of place-based opportunities. Outdoor learning, access to the surrounding environment, and the ability to use the community itself as part of the educational experience are valued assets, central to how many families and community members understand the school's value. These aspects may be difficult to replicate in a larger school.

The current enrollment creates very clear limitations. Small cohorts reduce the number of peers available for academic discussion, collaborative learning, social development, and friendship. They also limit the school's ability to create flexible instructional groupings or consistently provide students with classmates working at similar levels. These constraints grow more significant as students get older, academic work becomes more specialized, peer interaction matters more, and enrichment and extracurricular opportunities expand.

Staff described the same tension, identifying Grafton Elementary's small scale as both a strength and a constraint. Multiple educators said students would benefit from larger cohorts, particularly as academic, social, and developmental needs become more complex across the elementary years.

The school's staffing structure provides considerable adult support relative to enrollment, including classroom teachers, intervention and special education services, counseling, health services, and access to specialists. That level of support can be especially valuable for students with significant academic, behavioral, or social-emotional needs, and staff described a strong ability to collaborate around individual students and intervene quickly when concerns arise.

Family experiences with student support, however, were not uniformly positive. Some parents described difficulty accessing special education services or understanding changes in support

plans, including movement between IEP and 504 structures. Other families described the small-school environment as especially beneficial for children with specialized needs. The evidence therefore is mixed: Grafton Elementary has considerable support capacity and a staff culture that emphasizes individual attention, but some families experience barriers or confusion accessing those services.

The current program is also highly dependent on a very small number of individual staff members. In a school this size, a vacancy, leave, retirement, or leadership transition can have an outsized effect on program continuity. The recent principal transition illustrates that vulnerability. Small schools can be flexible, but they also have limited redundancy when a key position changes quickly.

C. Student Achievement and Growth

The available achievement data presents a mixed but generally improving picture. Grafton Elementary is producing credible academic outcomes, particularly in literacy, while mathematics remains an area requiring attention. At the same time, the school's very small enrollment requires caution in interpreting percentages and year-to-year changes because the performance of a small number of students can materially affect schoolwide results.

Literacy indicators show the clearest positive trend. VT-CAP ELA proficiency increased from 30 percent in 2023 to 33 percent in 2024 and 42 percent in 2025. DIBELS results show a similar pattern. At the end of 2022-23, approximately 28 percent of students were at or above benchmark. That proportion increased to 55 percent in 2023-24, remained near that level at 52 percent in 2024-25, and reached 67 percent in 2025-26. Over the same period, the proportion of students identified as well below benchmark declined from 67 percent to 22 percent.

Schoolwide MAP results are consistent with that improvement. The median reading achievement percentile increased from the 51st percentile in spring 2025 to the 57th percentile in spring 2026. Half of tested students scored above the 60th percentile in spring 2026, although a substantial group also remained below the 41st percentile. The distribution reflects both areas of strength and continuing individual student needs.

Mathematics results remain weaker. VT-CAP mathematics proficiency was 17 percent in 2023, declined to 9 percent in 2024, and increased to 26 percent in 2025. The schoolwide MAP mathematics median increased from the 41st percentile in spring 2025 to the 45th percentile in spring 2026. Approximately half of tested students remained below the 41st percentile in the most recent MAP results.

The grade-level MAP data shows considerable variation across cohorts, but the broader multi-year evidence does not establish a persistent academic divide between the primary and intermediate grades. Earlier analysis raised that possibility because current grade-level results were stronger in several primary cohorts. The additional schoolwide data provides a more complete picture, including improved VT-CAP ELA results in the tested grades.

Exhibit 3. Grafton Elementary Student Achievement Trends

Measure	Prior Results	Most Recent Results
VT-CAP ELA Proficient	30% (2023)	42% (2025)
VT-CAP Math Proficient	17% (2023)	26% (2025)
DIBELS At/Above Benchmark	28% (2022-23)	67% (2025-26)
MAP Reading Median	51st percentile (Spring 2025)	57th percentile (Spring 2026)
MAP Math Median	41st percentile (Spring 2025)	45th percentile (Spring 2026)

Multiple measures show improving literacy outcomes. Mathematics remains more uneven, although the most recent VT-CAP and MAP results improved from earlier reported levels. Because Grafton Elementary serves a very small number of students, year-to-year percentages should be interpreted cautiously.

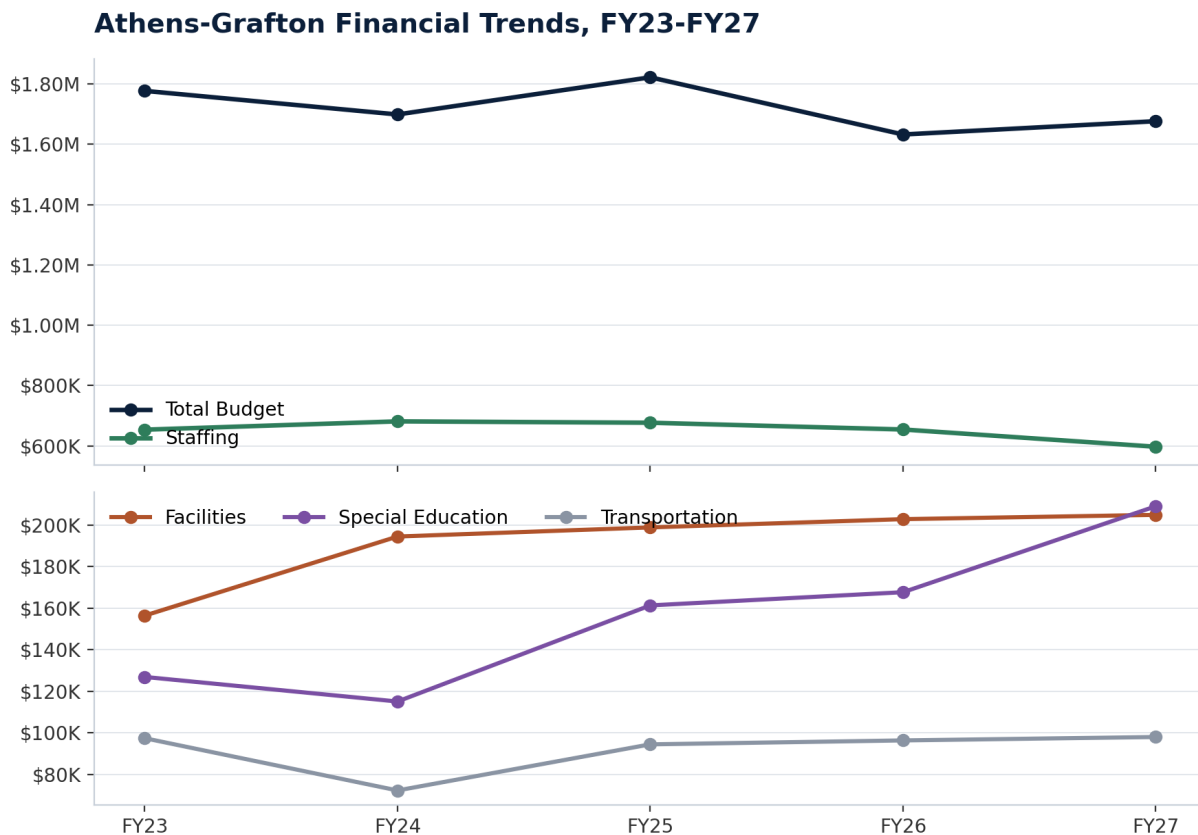
The achievement evidence shows credible and improving outcomes, particularly in literacy. It does not resolve the broader educational limitations associated with very small cohorts.

D. Financial and Operational Profile

The district has adjusted staffing and spending as enrollment declined. Staffing has been reduced, positions shared or contracted, and the overall budget held relatively flat despite rising costs in several areas.

From FY23 through FY27, the total Athens-Grafton budget declined from approximately \$1.78 million to \$1.68 million. Over the same period, staffing costs declined from approximately \$654,000 to \$597,000. Transportation costs remained relatively stable, while facilities costs increased from approximately \$156,000 to \$205,000 and special education costs increased from approximately \$127,000 to \$209,000.

Exhibit 4. Five-Year Financial Trend



Category	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY23-FY 27
Total Budget	\$1,776,984	\$1,698,767	\$1,822,000	\$1,632,408	\$1,676,464	-5.7%
Staffing	\$653,825	\$681,316	\$676,865	\$654,429	\$597,227	-8.7%
Transportation	\$97,414	\$72,288	\$94,460	\$96,349	\$97,996	+0.6%
Facilities	\$156,382	\$194,403	\$198,790	\$202,765	\$204,820	+31.0%
Special Education	\$126,877	\$115,065	\$161,288	\$167,627	\$208,956	+64.7%

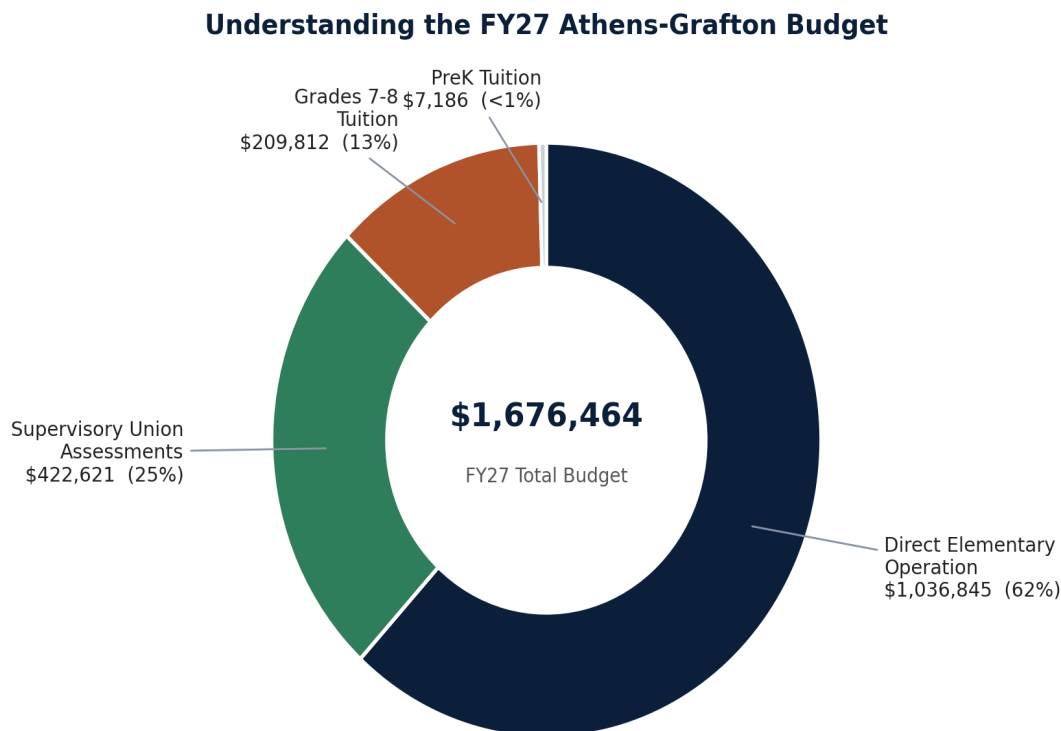
The district has reduced staffing and held overall spending below FY23 levels, but several costs have continued to rise. The trend shows the limits of relying on incremental reductions as enrollment declines.

Many operating costs do not decline proportionally with enrollment. Even at current scale, the school requires classroom coverage, administration, transportation, facilities, student support, and specialized services.

The FY27 budget requires careful interpretation. The full district budget of approximately \$1.68 million is not the cost of operating Grafton Elementary. It includes expenditures beyond the K-6 school, including tuition for older students, supervisory union assessments, special education, early childhood obligations, and other district responsibilities. The direct elementary operating

component is approximately \$1.04 million, which is the more useful figure for understanding the cost of maintaining the current K-6 program.

Exhibit 5. FY27 Budget Structure



Budget Component	FY27
Direct Elementary Operation	\$1,036,845
Grades 7-8 Tuition	\$209,812
Supervisory Union Assessments	\$422,621
PreK Tuition	\$7,186
Total District Budget	\$1,676,464

Within SU assessments: Early childhood \$20,769 | Central office \$170,499 | Food service \$22,397 | Special education \$208,956

Approximately \$1.04 million of the FY27 budget is associated with direct elementary operation. The remainder covers tuition, supervisory union assessments, early childhood, special education, and other district obligations that would continue under a different structure.

Different measures of "per pupil spending" should not be used interchangeably. Vermont's statutory education spending calculation uses weighted average daily membership and includes revenues and expenditures beyond the direct operation of Grafton Elementary. The district's FY27 statutory education spending figure is fundamentally different from simply dividing the cost of the

elementary program by the number of enrolled K-6 students. Each measure answers a different question.

The district's current financial position is also affected by the use of prior-year revenues and surplus. Those resources reduce the immediate tax impact of a budget, but they do not change the underlying recurring cost of the educational model. As available surplus declines, the structural relationship between enrollment, operating cost, and taxation becomes more visible.

Closure or substantial restructuring would reduce some direct operating costs, but it would not eliminate the district's financial obligations. Replacement tuition would become a major expense. Transportation could remain similar or increase depending on the receiving-school model. Special education and supervisory union responsibilities would continue in some form. Governance and administrative functions would remain necessary even if the district became non-operating.

The school building creates an additional distinction between school-budget savings and community-wide savings. The building is owned by the Town of Grafton and leased to the school district for one dollar annually. If Grafton Elementary ceased operation, some facilities expenses currently carried by the school budget could shift to the municipality depending on the building's future use. A reduction in school spending would not necessarily represent an equivalent reduction in costs borne by local taxpayers.

E. Community and Institutional Context

Grafton Elementary remains an important community institution, but its current relationship with the community is more complicated than its historical role suggests. Many residents continue to describe the school as central to Grafton's identity and character. That attachment is real. Community use of the building, volunteer involvement, shared activities, and informal connections between residents and the school appear to have diminished over time.

Internally, the school has developed a strong professional culture. Staff consistently described close working relationships, mutual support, direct communication, and a shared commitment to students. That internal cohesion is one of the school's clearest strengths and contributes directly to the individualized support students receive.

The external picture is less consistent. Some current families described highly positive experiences with the school, staff, and leadership. Others described frustration, reduced trust, difficulty raising concerns, and a sense that the school had become less open to parents and the broader community. Community Forum participants also expressed interest in rebuilding volunteer opportunities, restoring stronger community-school connections, and making the school more accessible as a shared community resource.

The current leadership transition adds another layer of uncertainty. The outgoing principal was closely associated with the development of the school's internal staff culture, and some of that cohesion may be difficult to preserve through a change in leadership. The transition also creates an opportunity to strengthen family and community relationships without losing the internal practices staff value.

Athens and Grafton also experience the school district differently. Grafton is home to the school building and has the strongest direct connection to its civic and historical role. Athens families are more likely to experience the issue through access, transportation, and equity concerns. Limited vehicle access, longer travel distances, and difficult geography make future receiving-school arrangements potentially more consequential for some Athens families than for families living in Grafton.

These differences do not require separate educational systems, but they do require separate analysis. A future model that looks efficient or convenient at the district level could create unequal burdens if transportation, family access, and receiving-school geography are not considered carefully.

IV. Core Findings

Finding 1. Grafton Elementary Has Genuine Educational and Cultural Strengths

Grafton Elementary has genuine educational and cultural strengths. Students benefit from close adult relationships, individual attention, a collaborative staff culture, and outdoor and place-based opportunities that are difficult to reproduce in a larger setting.

Academic evidence reinforces that conclusion. Literacy outcomes have improved across multiple measures, the schoolwide MAP reading median is above the national median, and the broader pattern does not indicate generalized academic weakness. Small cohorts require caution in interpreting individual years.

These strengths are worth protecting. The Board's challenge is to determine whether they can be sustained within a structure that also addresses enrollment, scale, staffing, and cost.

Finding 2. Very Small Scale Creates Educational Constraints, Particularly as Students Get Older

Grafton Elementary's small size creates several of its defining strengths. At current enrollment, that same scale also limits the range of experiences available to students, most visibly in peer interaction, instructional grouping, academic challenge, enrichment, extracurricular opportunity, and staffing flexibility.

Very small groups can allow unusually individualized instruction. Cohorts of only a few students, however, limit the range of peer and instructional configurations a school can consistently offer. Students may have few classmates working at similar academic levels, limited opportunities to engage with different peers, and fewer chances to participate in activities that depend on a larger group.

Staff raised this concern repeatedly. Several educators described the need for more students and identified larger class cohorts as educationally healthier than the current configuration, especially for older elementary students, whose academic and social needs increasingly depend on broader peer interaction, more varied grouping, greater specialization, and opportunities for challenge beyond the immediate classroom.

The student outcome data does not establish that these structural limitations are producing lower academic performance. Several schoolwide indicators have improved, particularly in literacy. The concern identified through the study is broader than test performance: very small cohorts limit the range of peers, instructional configurations, enrichment, and academic experiences available to students even where academic outcomes are improving.

The neighboring-school comparison reinforces this finding. Larger schools do not uniformly outperform Grafton academically, but they offer greater capacity for instructional grouping, peer interaction, specialization, and extracurricular opportunity.

Finding 3. Enrollment Decline Is Structural, and Available Evidence Does Not Show a Natural Recovery

Enrollment decline reflects a longer-term structural pattern in the available enrollment history, projections, demographic conditions, and stakeholder input.

The number of students attending Grafton Elementary has fallen sharply from historical levels, and current projections do not show a rebound through FY29. Individual grade cohorts remain very small, and there is no identified group of younger students large enough to change that trajectory under the current model.

Stakeholder input consistently connected enrollment decline to conditions beyond the school itself: housing affordability, limited availability of homes suited to younger families, second-home ownership, an aging population, and low birth numbers. These conditions are not easily or quickly changed by the school district. Further, it is not the sole responsibility of the school district to bend the curve with regard to these trends.

Some resident students are homeschooled or attend other settings, and community members believe broader access could attract students from neighboring communities. The current evidence does not establish demand sufficient to materially change enrollment.

Any future model that depends on enrollment growth should therefore be based on demonstrated demand and a credible enrollment model.

Finding 4. The District Has Already Adapted Financially and Operationally, but Scale Continues to Erode Efficiency and Resilience

Athens-Grafton has already taken real steps to reduce and restructure costs as enrollment declined. The financial record does not show a district maintaining an unchanged staffing or operating model despite shrinking enrollment.

As Section III.D shows, staffing and overall spending have already been reduced while several fixed and mandated costs have continued to rise.

This pattern shows the limits of further incremental cost reduction. Some expenses can be adjusted as enrollment changes, but many cannot be reduced in direct proportion to the number of students. The school still requires classroom coverage, administration, student support, transportation, building operation, and access to specialized services.

The same issue applies operationally. A very small school can be flexible because staff know one another well and can respond quickly. It can also become increasingly dependent on individual employees. When one person leaves, retires, takes leave, or cannot be replaced easily, the effect on the overall program can be considerable.

Further efficiency alone is unlikely to resolve the underlying problem. The Board can continue to make responsible budget and staffing adjustments, but those actions do not change the structural relationship between very small enrollment and the minimum resources required to operate a full

K-6 school. The Board must determine whether the current organizational model remains the most effective and sustainable way to provide educational opportunity to the district's students.

Finding 5. Closure or Major Restructuring Could Produce Real Financial Savings, but Less Than the Apparent Cost of the Current District Budget

Closure or major restructuring could reduce recurring costs, although the financial effect is easily overstated if the full Athens-Grafton budget is treated as the cost of operating Grafton Elementary.

As Section III.D explains, the FY27 district budget of approximately \$1.68 million includes substantial obligations that continue regardless of Grafton Elementary's status. The direct elementary operating component, approximately \$1.04 million, remains the better starting point for estimating the financial effect of change.

If Grafton Elementary were no longer operated as a full K-6 school, a substantial portion of those direct operating costs could be reduced. Those savings would then be offset by replacement tuition, transportation changes, continuing special education obligations, administrative responsibilities, and transition costs. The resulting net savings would be materially smaller than the total cost currently associated with the district or even the full direct elementary operating budget.

The available evidence is strong enough to conclude that closure or substantial restructuring could produce recurring savings. It is not yet strong enough to support a precise net savings estimate without final assumptions about tuition, transportation, receiving schools, special education, administrative costs, and the future treatment of the building.

The Board must weigh the likely recurring savings against the educational, transportation, and community consequences of each alternative.

Finding 6. Athens and Grafton Experience Structural Change Differently

Athens and Grafton would experience structural change differently. Grafton's concerns center more directly on the school as a civic institution and the future of the building. Athens presents greater transportation, access, and family-logistics concerns.

Current transportation already requires substantial travel for some students, and future receiving-school arrangements could affect the two towns differently. A single destination should not automatically be assumed to provide the most equitable solution.

Each pathway should therefore be tested separately for its effect on Athens and Grafton, particularly in transportation, family access, and participation.

Finding 7. Strong Internal Professional Culture Coexists With Weaker Trust Among Portions of the Parent and Broader Community

Grafton Elementary's internal professional culture is one of its clearest strengths. Staff consistently described collaboration, strong relationships, and shared responsibility for students.

Family and community experiences are less consistent. Some families described positive relationships, while others reported reduced trust, difficulty raising concerns, and weaker connections between the school and community.

The leadership transition creates an opportunity to preserve the school's internal strengths while rebuilding external trust. Any preservation or redesign strategy should address that relationship directly.

Finding 8. Vermont Communities Have Used Multiple Transition Models, and Implementation Quality Matters

Recent Vermont experience demonstrates that communities facing very small-school enrollment have used several structural models, including non-operating status, regional consolidation, grade reconfiguration, and continued limited use of former school buildings.

These cases do not identify a preferred model for Athens-Grafton. Their principal lesson is implementation: receiving schools, transportation, staffing, family communication, governance, and building use must be designed as part of the transition rather than after a structural decision is made.

V. Comparative Evidence and External Research

A. Neighboring School Comparison

The study considered several neighboring schools as potential points of comparison and, in some cases, possible receiving schools under a future restructuring: Westminster Center School, Chester-Andover Elementary School, Townshend Elementary School, and Saxtons River Elementary School.

The comparison examines differences in educational capacity, student opportunity, and the strengths students could gain or lose under another setting. Available achievement data does not support ranking any neighboring school as categorically better than Grafton Elementary.

The neighboring schools generally operate at a larger scale and therefore have greater structural capacity. Larger grade cohorts create broader peer groups and make it easier to organize students by instructional need, provide multiple academic groupings, and expose students to classmates with a wider range of interests and abilities. This difference is particularly relevant in the intermediate grades, where academic discussion, peer collaboration, specialization, and access to students working at similar levels become increasingly important.

Program breadth is another important difference. Chester-Andover, for example, operates a substantially larger elementary program with multiple classrooms across grade levels and access to art, music, physical education, library, guidance, after-school programming, summer programming, outdoor education, and other enrichment opportunities. Townshend similarly provides access to broader extracurricular and out-of-school opportunities, including youth sports and structured intervention programs. Westminster and Saxtons River also operate within larger systems that provide greater access to shared staffing, programming, and peer groups than Grafton can reasonably reproduce at its current enrollment.

Academic comparisons are less conclusive. Available data from neighboring schools shows mixed achievement results and ongoing improvement needs in several settings. Some larger schools perform better than Grafton in particular areas, while others face similar or greater academic challenges. The evidence does not support a claim that moving a student from Grafton to a larger neighboring school would necessarily result in stronger academic performance.

The advantage of larger schools is better understood as one of capacity and opportunity: more peers, more instructional configurations, broader enrichment, greater extracurricular access, and more staffing flexibility. Whether an individual student benefits from those opportunities depends on the quality of implementation, the student's needs, and the specific receiving school.

Transportation also affects the usefulness of any comparison. Chester-Andover may be geographically practical for many Grafton students but less so for Athens students. Townshend may more naturally align with Athens. Westminster presents another possible option but raises different route and access considerations. Saxtons River is a useful comparative model within the

WNESU, but its current grade configuration makes it less straightforward as a direct K-6 receiving option.

Exhibit 6. Comparison of Grafton Elementary and Nearby School Settings

Area	Grafton	Chester-Andover	Townshend	Westminster	Saxtons River
School scale	Very small	Larger	Larger	Larger	Larger
Peer breadth	Limited	Broader	Broader	Broader	Broader
Instructional grouping	Limited by cohort size	Greater flexibility	Greater flexibility	Greater flexibility	Greater flexibility
Program breadth	More limited	Broad	Broader	Broader	Broader
Individual attention	Strong	More variable	More variable	More variable	More variable
Place-based setting	Distinctive strength	Different setting	Different setting	Different setting	Different setting
Academic evidence	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
Receiving-school practicality	Current school	Stronger for Grafton	Stronger for Athens	Possible for Athens	Comparative value; grade-span limits

Larger neighboring schools generally offer greater peer, instructional, staffing, and extracurricular capacity. Available achievement evidence does not establish that those schools are uniformly stronger academically than Grafton.

These geographic differences reinforce the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all receiving-school assumption. A future model that sends all Athens-Grafton students to the same school may be administratively simple while creating unnecessary transportation burdens for one of the two communities.

B. Transportation and Access

Evaluating any future model for Athens-Grafton requires more than the distance between a student's home and a receiving school. Travel time, route reliability, family transportation capacity, access to extracurricular activities, and the differing geography of Athens and Grafton all affect the practical impact of a school change.

Some students in the district already travel significant distances each day. Current route information shows morning pickups beginning before 7:00 a.m., with arrival at Grafton Elementary at approximately 7:45 - close to 50 minutes for some students - with afternoon routes involving further travel and transfers.

Research supports considering transportation as part of the student experience and educational access. A 2022 study of more than 120,000 New York City bus riders found that longer bus rides

reduced attendance and increased chronic absenteeism among students in district-choice programs. The study did not find a simple universal relationship between bus duration and academic achievement, but it did show that sufficiently long commutes can affect whether students are consistently present in school. (Cordes, Rick, and Schwartz, 2022)

Other research suggests that reliable school-provided transportation can itself improve access. A Michigan study found little overall effect of bus eligibility on achievement or attendance, but economically disadvantaged students eligible for district transportation were less likely to be chronically absent. (Edwards, 2022) This finding points to an important distinction: transportation can be a barrier when commutes become burdensome, but reliable district-provided transportation can also reduce barriers for families who might otherwise struggle to get children to school.

The broader research on commute length and student well-being also warrants attention, though much of it involves older students or settings that differ from rural Vermont. Studies have associated longer school commutes with reduced sleep, poorer self-reported well-being, absenteeism, and in some cases lower academic performance. These findings should not be directly transferred to the Athens-Grafton context, but they reinforce the importance of considering the total student experience when routes become substantially longer. (Journal of Transport & Health, 2023)

The available research does not establish a universally accepted maximum bus ride that determines whether a school arrangement is educationally appropriate. Route duration should be evaluated alongside student age, reliability, road conditions, transfer requirements, and the opportunities available at the destination. A 40- or 50-minute ride cannot be judged in isolation from what the student gains, how consistently transportation operates, or what alternatives are realistically available.

Access to activities outside the regular school day is equally important. A larger receiving school may offer more sports, clubs, enrichment, or after-school programming, but those opportunities have limited value if students cannot access a ride home afterward. For families without flexible work schedules or reliable private transportation, participation can depend almost entirely on whether transportation is included in the program design.

This issue is particularly important for Athens. Stakeholder input identified limited vehicle access for some families, difficult road geography, inconsistent cell service, and concerns about managing transportation disruptions. A broad school-choice model without a corresponding transportation system could provide substantially different levels of practical choice to different families.

The geography of the district may also argue against assuming every student should attend the same receiving school. Grafton is more naturally oriented toward Chester and Saxtons River, while Athens has stronger geographic connections toward Townshend, Westminster, and the surrounding transportation network. A future arrangement that recognizes those differences may produce more manageable routes than a single destination selected primarily for administrative simplicity.

Transportation is a design condition for every future pathway, evaluated through five considerations: ride duration, reliability, family access, access to programs beyond the regular school day, and equity between Athens and Grafton. The evidence does not make transportation a total barrier to structural change, but it does reveal that poorly designed transportation could substantially reduce the educational and practical value of an otherwise promising alternative.

C. Vermont Comparable Cases

Recent Vermont school closure and reconfiguration decisions provide useful context for Athens-Grafton. They do not establish what the district **should** do, and most are too recent to support any conclusions about long-term student outcomes. Their value is practical: they show how Vermont communities have responded to similar pressures involving enrollment, educational opportunity, staffing, facilities, transportation, and community identity.

Readsboro offers one of the closest comparisons. Readsboro Central School enrolled 37 students in PreK-6 in 2025-26, and the School Board cited continued enrollment decline, facility needs, and the difficulty of providing healthy peer interaction at that scale. Voters approved school closure in March 2026 by a vote of 222 to 36. (Vermont Public) The case is useful because Readsboro voters had previously rejected closure. The later decision suggests that community support for maintaining a small school can in fact shift when challenging underlying structural conditions persist.

Readsboro also illustrates the importance of implementation planning. Following the vote, some families reported uncertainty regarding receiving schools, transportation, programming, and services for the following school year. That information represents some parent experiences rather than a formal evaluation of the transition process, but it points to a predictable risk: approving closure does not by itself guarantee a workable transition for families. (The Deerfield Valley News)

Marlboro followed a more deliberate transition process. Marlboro School served approximately 50 students in PreK-8 before voters approved closure in March 2026 by a vote of 311 to 65. (Vermont Public) The district selected a non-operating model in which tuition would replace direct school operation, while transportation and building costs would continue in some form. Published budget information estimated that the difference between operating and non-operating budgets was approximately \$400,000 for the coming year. (Commons News)

The Marlboro case is especially relevant because direct discussion with longtime Board leadership emphasized communication, student experience, staff transition, and transportation planning as central to the process. Transportation was expected to be provided to receiving schools where sufficient numbers of students attended, rather than assuming every family could independently manage school choice. The lesson is clear for Athens-Grafton: a choice model becomes substantially more equitable when transportation is designed as part of the model rather than something to be addressed after the decision.

Taconic and Green Regional School District provides a different type of comparison. In November 2025, the regional Board voted 11 to 2 to close Sunderland Elementary School and Currier Memorial School. The decision followed an extended public process and occurred despite non-binding votes in the affected communities opposing closure; under the district's Organizing Articles, the regional Board held full authority over the closure decisions. Both schools closed in June 2026, with approximately 100 students from the two schools expected to attend the larger school in Dorset. District estimates projected approximately \$1 million in annual savings from each closure. (Vermont Public)

Taconic and Green is particularly relevant as a regional redesign. Students and facilities were reconfigured within an existing regional district, with the larger Dorset school absorbing students from Sunderland and Currier.

Jamaica offers another variation. In 2024, traditional K-5 operations ended, while the building continued temporarily as a preschool center. Pre-K use ended in 2026. The case demonstrates that school operation and future building use can be separate, and potentially temporary, decisions.

Exhibit 7. Recent Vermont Small-School Transitions

Community/System	Enrollment at Decision	Model	Key Feature	Lesson for Athens-Grafton
Readsboro	37	Non-operating / choice	Closure after earlier rejection	Structural conditions can outlast initial community resistance
Marlboro	~50	Non-operating / choice	Transportation tied to student concentrations	Transition planning needs to precede implementation
Taconic and Green	<50 at each closing school	Regional consolidation	Students and grades redistributed regionally	Closure can be part of system redesign
Jamaica	12	Receiving schools + local PreK	Some educational use retained in building until 2026	Building use and K-6 operation are separate, and each can be time-limited

Recent Vermont cases show several approaches to very small-school transition, including choice, regional consolidation, grade reconfiguration, and retained educational use of former school buildings. Their strongest value is in understanding implementation choices rather than predicting long-term student outcomes.

Across these cases, communities considered enrollment alongside educational opportunity, staffing, facilities, finances, transportation, and community impact. The structural choices varied, but each case reinforces the need to design receiving schools, transportation, communication, staffing transition, and building use before implementation.

VI. Future Pathways

The study ultimately identified four future pathways for Athens-Grafton. Each responds differently to the district's core conditions, and each carries its own educational, financial, operational, transportation, and community implications.

The pathways are evaluated against a common set of criteria: educational opportunity, student support and belonging, academic challenge, peer and social opportunity, equity and access, transportation, resilience to low enrollment, financial sustainability, staffing stability, community impact, implementation feasibility, and adaptability to state reform.

No pathway eliminates every tradeoff. This analysis identifies which options most directly address the conditions found in the study and which depend on assumptions not yet demonstrated.

Exhibit 8. Future Pathway Evaluation

Criterion	Current K-6	Differentiated Redesign	Partial Regionalization	Non-Operating / Receiving School
Educational opportunity	Moderate	Moderate to Strong	Strong	Strong
Student support / belonging	Strong	Strong	Moderate to Strong	Moderate
Academic challenge	Weak to Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Strong
Peer / social opportunity	Weak	Weak to Moderate	Strong	Strong
Equity / access	Moderate to Strong	Moderate to Strong	Moderate	Moderate, design dependent
Transportation	Moderate to Strong	Moderate to Strong	Moderate	Moderate to Weak
Resilience to low enrollment	Weak	Uncertain	Strong	Strong
Financial sustainability	Weak	Uncertain	Moderate	Strong
Staffing stability	Weak to Moderate	Moderate	Moderate to Strong	Strong systemically
Community preservation	Strong	Strong	Moderate to Strong	Weak
Implementation feasibility	Strong	Uncertain	Moderate	Moderate to Strong
Adaptability to state reform	Weak to Moderate	Moderate	Moderate to Strong	Moderate to Strong

Ratings reflect the evidence developed through the study and should be read as comparative judgments rather than numerical scores. Several ratings depend on the specific design ultimately selected.

Pathway 1. Maintain the Current K-6 Model

Under this pathway, Grafton Elementary would continue operating as a K-6 school with the existing basic structure. The district could continue making incremental adjustments to staffing, programming, and expenditures, but the fundamental organizational model would remain unchanged.

The primary advantage is continuity. Students would remain in a familiar setting, transportation patterns would remain largely stable, and the district would preserve the close relationships, individual attention, place-based opportunities, and community presence that are among Grafton Elementary's strongest features. It would also avoid the disruption of changing grade configurations, receiving schools, staffing, or governance arrangements.

The central weakness is that continuation does not address the structural conditions identified in the study. Enrollment is not projected to recover in any impactful way, individual grade cohorts remain extremely small, and the educational limitations tied to scale are likely to continue. The district would also remain dependent on a small staff structure in which individual vacancies or transitions can have a significant effect on the program.

Financially, the district has already reduced and restructured costs. Additional efficiencies may remain possible, but the evidence does not suggest incremental reductions can resolve the underlying relationship between very small enrollment and the fixed costs of operating a full elementary school. Continuing the current structure would preserve both its strengths and its existing financial pressures.

For the current K-6 model to become a credible long-term strategy, the district would need evidence of a far more stable enrollment base, a sustainable staffing structure, and an educational model capable of providing sufficient breadth and challenge across all grade levels. The study has not identified evidence that those conditions currently exist.

Analytical conclusion: Maintaining the current K-6 model remains feasible in the very short term, but it does not provide a credible long-term response to the district's enrollment, scale, educational, staffing, and financial conditions.

Pathway 2. Redesign Grafton as a Differentiated/Magnet School

Under this pathway, Grafton Elementary would continue operating, but with a fundamentally different purpose or enrollment strategy. Possible models include broader regional access, a more intentional outdoor or place-based identity, expanded early-childhood programming, a specialized student-support role, or another differentiated program designed to attract students beyond the current Athens-Grafton enrollment base.

The strongest argument for this pathway is that it builds from assets the school already has: a highly relational environment, a distinctive physical setting, close adult support, and a staff culture capable of working flexibly across roles. Those strengths could form the basis of a more clearly defined educational model rather than an attempt to maintain a conventional K-6 structure at very small scale.

A differentiated/magnet model could also help reconnect the school with the broader community by giving it a clearer purpose and identity. If the school served students from a wider area, it could potentially increase peer opportunities, strengthen enrollment, and improve the relationship between fixed operating costs and the number of students served.

However, those possibilities are very much unproven. Broader enrollment would need to be demonstrated through actual family demand and commitment, and specialization alone would not resolve the scale problem if enrollment remained near current levels.

Implementation would also require support beyond Athens-Grafton. Broader enrollment would depend on supervisory union or regional agreements, transportation arrangements, governance authority, and the willingness of neighboring communities to participate. Any specialized program would require a staffing model, a clearly defined educational purpose, and a recurring financial structure that could be sustained over time.

For this pathway to be viable, the district would need to design and demonstrate a specific program model, generate evidence of family demand, establish a credible enrollment target,

nurture partner support, assess transportation feasibility, validate staffing capacity, and confirm recurring financial sustainability.

Analytical conclusion: A differentiated/magnet redesign is worth testing because Grafton has genuine assets that could support a distinctive educational role. Its viability depends on whether the redesign produces a material change in enrollment or regional function. Redesign that leaves the school at roughly its current scale would preserve the institution without resolving any of its primary structural weaknesses.

Pathway 3. Regionalize Part of the Educational Program

Under this pathway, Athens-Grafton would retain some educational programming at Grafton Elementary while regionalizing other grades or services. The most promising version identified through the study is a model that maintains primary-aged students (perhaps grades K-2 or K-3) at Grafton Elementary and establishes a system by which intermediate students (grades 3-6 or 4-6) attend schools in neighboring communities. This model could include arranging with other neighboring schools to develop partnerships in this regard. For example: all K-2 students from specific towns attend Grafton Elementary, and all 3-6 students from those same towns attend another school that would serve intermediate grades only.

This pathway responds directly to the educational constraints created by very small cohorts. As students move through the elementary grades, peer interaction, instructional grouping, academic differentiation, enrichment, extracurricular participation, and access to specialized learning become increasingly important. A regional model could preserve close relationships, local access, and place-based learning for younger children while providing older students with broader peer groups, greater instructional flexibility, and expanded academic and extracurricular opportunities.

Unlike a differentiated/magnet school redesign, this pathway does not depend entirely on attracting additional students to Grafton. It addresses the scale problem by changing the grade structure rather than assuming enrollment will increase enough to sustain the current K-6 model.

There are, however, important limitations. A reduced grade span could mean even fewer students physically attending Grafton unless enrollment were expanded through regional arrangements. Many fixed costs, including facilities, administration, and some staffing, would remain. The district could improve the educational fit of the program without necessarily creating the strongest financial model.

Transportation would also become more complex. Older students would need to travel to receiving schools, and the practical implications would differ for Athens and Grafton. A model that works well for Grafton students could create greater travel burdens for Athens students. Receiving-school capacity, transportation routes, after-school access, and family logistics would all need to be examined before a grade-span model could be considered viable.

The pathway would also require cooperation beyond Athens-Grafton. Receiving schools would need sufficient capacity and willingness to participate. Staffing assignments, tuition or

cost-sharing arrangements, governance authority, and the relationship to broader regional restructuring would need to be resolved.

For this pathway to be viable, the district would need to establish an educationally defensible grade configuration, receiving-school agreements, equitable transportation, a sustainable staffing structure, a realistic financial model, and a clear governance framework.

Analytical conclusion: Partial regionalization is the strongest alternative identified that keeps an academic program in Grafton. It addresses many of the educational limitations created by very small cohorts while preserving some local educational presence. Its viability depends on whether the remaining Grafton program can be sustained and whether workable receiving-school, transportation, financial, staffing, and governance arrangements can be established.

Pathway 4. Transition to a Non-Operating or Receiving-School Model

Under this pathway, Athens-Grafton would cease operating Grafton Elementary as a K-6 school and establish a new structure for educating resident students through designated receiving schools, broader school choice, or some combination of the two. Transportation, student transition, staffing, and building use would become central implementation responsibilities.

The principal advantage of this pathway is that it directly addresses the structural conditions identified in the study. The district would no longer depend on maintaining sufficient local enrollment to support a full elementary program. Students would gain access to larger peer groups, broader instructional groupings, expanded enrichment and extracurricular opportunities, and greater staffing depth.

Closing the school would eliminate a substantial portion of direct elementary operating costs, though replacement tuition, transportation, special education, governance, and other district responsibilities would remain, and the result would likely be real recurring savings rather than savings equivalent to the full current district budget.

The educational benefits should not be overstated. The neighboring-school comparison does not establish that students would automatically achieve at higher levels in another school. The stronger argument is that larger settings generally provide greater breadth of opportunity and organizational capacity. Whether individual students benefit from those opportunities would depend on the quality of the receiving school, transition supports, and each student's needs.

The greatest liabilities of this pathway are community impact, transportation, and the loss of the highly personalized environment Grafton currently provides. The school remains an important community institution, and closure would be a major change for Grafton. Students would also lose some of the familiarity, individual attention, and place-based experience associated with the current school.

Transportation design would be particularly important. A broad choice model without corresponding transportation could create unequal access, especially for Athens families with

limited private transportation. A designated receiving-school model, limited-choice structure, or transportation to schools serving a sufficient concentration of students may provide a more equitable approach. The district should not assume that one receiving school will necessarily serve both communities equally well.

Recent Vermont cases show that these issues become immediate once a closure decision is made, and that communities have used different receiving-school and transportation models depending on geography and governance. Athens-Grafton would need to design its own approach rather than simply replicate another district's transition.

For this pathway to be viable, the district would need identified receiving-school options, equitable transportation arrangements, a clear financial model, transition support for students and families, staffing plans, and a coordinated process for addressing the future of the building.

Analytical conclusion: A planned transition to a non-operating or receiving-school model provides the strongest long-term response to enrollment, scale, staffing, and financial sustainability if a viable preservation-oriented alternative cannot be established. It also carries the greatest community and transition consequences. Those costs do not make the pathway unworkable, but they require deliberate planning and should be addressed before implementation, not after a closure decision is made.

VII. Recommendations

The Board should not treat continuation of the current K-6 model as the default long-term course.

The evidence supports a more deliberate sequence: test two options that would keep educational programming in Grafton, and move to a planned non-operating transition if the conditions for viability that are required cannot be met.

Recommendation 1

Do not rely on the current K-6 model as the long-term default.

Grafton Elementary can continue operating in the very short term, but the study does not support the current structure as a sustainable long-term model. Enrollment is unlikely to recover on its own, very small cohorts limit educational breadth, staffing remains fragile, and the cost structure cannot be solved through incremental reductions alone.

The Board should continue operating the current K-6 model through the 2026-2027 school year while completing a brief, defined feasibility process to determine the district's long-term structure and plans.

Recommendation 2

Give priority to a partial regionalization (primary/intermediate) model.

The strongest option that keeps educational programming in Grafton is a local-based primary school / regional-based intermediate school structure. This merits priority for feasibility testing because it responds directly to the age-related limits created by very small cohorts while preserving local access and the strengths of the Grafton setting for younger students.

The Board should fully test this model before committing to it. That work should determine the most appropriate grade span, identify possible receiving schools, assess transportation for both Athens and Grafton, establish staffing needs, model recurring costs, and confirm governance and legal feasibility.

Recommendation 3

Test a differentiated/magnet redesign only if solid and verifiable demand can be demonstrated.

A differentiated/magnet Grafton model also warrants consideration, especially where it builds from existing strengths such as outdoor learning, close adult support, or a specialized regional role.

Because this pathway depends on changing the enrollment base or establishing a broader regional function, its viability must be demonstrated through actual demand and operating conditions. Program identity alone will not resolve the scale problem.

Before the Board advances this pathway, it should have clear evidence of family demand, partner support, a realistic enrollment target, transportation feasibility, staffing capacity, and a recurring financial model.

Recommendation 4

Establish the required viability conditions for any model considered that keeps educational programming in Grafton.

Any model considered should meet the same basic conditions:

- The model expands educational opportunity, especially in the areas now constrained by very small cohorts.
- Enrollment or grade configuration supports a coherent and sustainable program.
- Required regional partners and receiving schools are prepared to participate.
- Transportation works for both Athens and Grafton and does not create unequal access.
- Staffing can be maintained without relying on an unusually fragile structure.
- Recurring costs are sustainable without dependence on temporary surplus or unsupported enrollment assumptions.
- Governance and legal requirements can be met as Vermont's education and governance framework continues to evolve.

These conditions should be established before the Board begins the feasibility process so that the final decision can be made against agreed standards rather than shifting expectations.

Recommendation 5

Set a defined decision point.

The feasibility process should have a fixed timeline and a clear end date. The Board should identify one or two models for serious evaluation, complete the required educational, financial, transportation, staffing, and governance analysis, and make a final structural decision at the end of that period.

The Board should consider the options in Recommendations 2 and 3 during the month of September 2026.

By October 1, 2026, the Board should be prepared to decide whether it will begin taking serious and focused action onward either Recommendation.

If neither Recommendation finds traction or promise, the Board should be prepared to begin public conversations about proceeding with Recommendation 6 below.

Recommendation 6

Move to a planned transition to non-operation if the review of Recommendations 2 and 3 do not meet the required viability conditions.

If the feasibility process does not produce a model that satisfies the Board's established conditions, the district should proceed toward a non-operating or receiving-school structure.

That transition should be planned before implementation. Receiving-school options, transportation, student and family support, special education continuity, staff transition, financial implications, and the future of the building should all be addressed as part of the transition design. That work and the public engagement that is a part of it should occur in October, November, and December. This would allow the Board - if it chose to do so - to propose and approve a warning for consideration on Town Meeting Day 2027 through which community members could approve or reject the Board's recommendation.

VIII. Implementation and Decision Framework

The next phase should be a short feasibility process ending in a clear Board decision.

A. Immediate Board Actions

The Board should identify the specific models it intends to test, giving priority to partial regionalization and considering differentiated redesign only where there is credible evidence of broader enrollment or regional purpose. It should also confirm the viability criteria established in the recommendation.

B. Feasibility Work

The feasibility phase should answer a limited number of practical questions:

- What grade configuration best matches the educational strengths and constraints identified in the study?
- Which receiving schools have the capacity and willingness to participate?
- What would transportation look like for Athens and Grafton under each model?
- What staffing structure would be required at Grafton and at receiving schools?
- What are the recurring costs of each model?
- What governance, legal, or regional agreements would be required?
- If a differentiated model is considered, what evidence shows that families outside Athens-Grafton would enroll?

This work should produce enough detail for the Board to compare actual models rather than concepts.

C. Partner and Receiving-School Engagement

Regional discussions should begin early in the feasibility process. Potential receiving schools and district partners should be asked to address capacity, grade configuration, staffing implications, transportation, student support, and the timing of any transition.

These conversations should include the likely differences between Athens and Grafton. A single receiving-school arrangement may not provide the best balance of access and transportation for both towns.

D. Financial and Transportation Modeling

Each model should be accompanied by a recurring-cost estimate using consistent assumptions. The analysis should distinguish direct school operating costs from costs that would continue under any structure, including transportation, special education, district administration, and supervisory union responsibilities.

Transportation modeling should include route length, estimated student ride time, reliability, after-school access, and family burden. The analysis should be conducted separately for Athens and Grafton.

E. Community Communication

The Board should communicate the feasibility process as a defined decision process rather than another general discussion about whether the school should remain open.

Community updates should show:

- Which models are being tested
- The conditions each model must meet
- What information remains unresolved
- When the Board expects to make a decision

F. Decision Point

At the end of the feasibility period, the Board should determine whether any preservation-oriented model meets the established viability conditions.

If a model meets those conditions, the Board should move into implementation planning with clear timelines, responsibilities, and partner commitments.

If no model meets those conditions, the Board should begin planning for a non-operating or receiving-school structure.

G. Transition Planning, if Required

A transition plan should be developed before implementation and should address receiving schools, transportation, student transition, special education continuity, staffing, family enrollment support, communication, and the future of the building.

The Town of Grafton should be included early in any building discussion because ownership and future operating costs would shift the nature of the issue from school district operations to municipal planning.

The Board should also identify the time required for family notice, school visits, staffing decisions, transportation contracts, and any statutory or governance steps. The transition should be designed around a known implementation date rather than assembled after the structural decision has already been made.

IX. Appendices

The appendices preserve the evidence base without forcing technical detail into the main narrative. They are limited to material a Board member, administrator, or community member may reasonably want to examine after reading the report.

Appendix A. Enrollment and Demographic Context

Current enrollment information, enrollment projections, and other available district information were sufficient to establish the scale and direction of enrollment at Grafton Elementary. A complete historical year-by-year enrollment series and a separate official current grade-level roster were not available for the study.

Grafton Elementary currently serves between 19 and 26 students across Kindergarten through Grade 6, depending on the school year. Available district projections do not show enrollment recovery through FY29. The distribution of students across seven grade levels produces very small cohorts, with several grades containing only a handful of students.

The available information also supports the conclusion that enrollment decline is connected to broader demographic conditions. Stakeholder input consistently identified housing affordability, second-home ownership, an aging population, limited availability of housing for younger families, low birth numbers, and a limited pipeline of younger children. Some resident school-aged children are also homeschooled or attend other educational settings.

Community members have suggested that broader enrollment access could attract families from neighboring communities. The study did not identify documented demand sufficient to estimate the number of students who would enroll under such a model.

The available enrollment evidence supports three conclusions:

- Grafton Elementary is operating at a very small scale across seven grades.
- Available projections do not indicate a natural enrollment recovery through FY29.
- Any future model that depends on enrollment growth will need to demonstrate where additional students would come from and how many are realistically likely to enroll.

The absence of a complete historical enrollment series limits the precision of a year-by-year trend analysis. It does not change the central scale and enrollment conditions identified in the study.

Appendix B. Student Achievement Data

Student achievement was reviewed using Vermont Comprehensive Assessment Program (VT-CAP), DIBELS literacy data, and NWEA MAP achievement data. Each measure provides a different view of student performance. Grafton Elementary's small number of students requires caution when interpreting percentages and year-to-year changes.

VT-CAP Proficiency

Measure	2023	2024	2025
ELA Proficient	30%	33%	42%
Mathematics Proficient	17%	9%	26%

ELA proficiency increased across all three reported years. Mathematics results were less consistent, declining in 2024 before increasing in 2025.

DIBELS End-of-Year Literacy

Measure	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
At or Above Benchmark	28%	55%	52%	67%
Well Below Benchmark	67%	30%	32%	22%

The DIBELS results show the clearest sustained improvement in the available academic record. The share of students at or above benchmark increased from approximately 28 percent to 67 percent, while the share identified as well below benchmark declined from 67 percent to 22 percent.

NWEA MAP Schoolwide Achievement

Measure	Spring 2025	Spring 2026
Reading median achievement percentile	51st	57th
Mathematics median achievement percentile	41st	45th
Reading students above 60th percentile	40%	50%
Mathematics students above 60th percentile	36%	39%

These results are schoolwide achievement snapshots rather than longitudinal tracking of a single cohort.

Because individual cohorts are extremely small, one or two students can materially affect school percentages. Results are most useful when considered across multiple measures and years.

Appendix C. Financial Detail

Five-Year Financial Trend

Category	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY26	FY27	FY23-FY27
Total Budget	\$1,776,984	\$1,698,767	\$1,822,000	\$1,632,408	\$1,676,464	-5.7%
Staffing	\$653,825	\$681,316	\$676,865	\$654,429	\$597,227	-8.7%
Transportation	\$97,414	\$72,288	\$94,460	\$96,349	\$97,996	+0.6%
Facilities	\$156,382	\$194,403	\$198,790	\$202,765	\$204,820	+31.0%
Special Education	\$126,877	\$115,065	\$161,288	\$167,627	\$208,956	+64.7%

The district has reduced staffing expenditures and held total spending below FY23 levels while facilities and special education costs have increased. These trends support the conclusion that Athens-Grafton has already adjusted its operating structure as enrollment declined.

FY27 Budget Structure

Component	FY27
Direct Elementary Operation	\$1,036,845
Grades 7-8 Tuition	\$209,812
Supervisory Union Assessments	\$422,621
PreK Tuition	\$7,186
Total District Budget	\$1,676,464

The full district budget should not be interpreted as the operating cost of Grafton Elementary. Approximately \$1.04 million is associated with direct elementary operation. The remaining expenditures include obligations that would continue in some form under another educational structure.

Financial Effects of Structural Change

Cost Area	Likely Effect Under Closure or Major Restructuring
Direct elementary staffing	Significant reduction possible
Building operation	Reduction in school budget, with some costs potentially shifting to Town
Elementary tuition	New or increased cost
Transportation	Continues and could increase
Special education	Continues in some form
Supervisory union services	Continues, though allocation could change
Governance and administration	Continues

Cost Area	Likely Effect Under Closure or Major Restructuring
Transition expenses	Potential one-time cost

A precise net-savings estimate requires final assumptions about receiving schools, tuition, transportation, staffing, special education, administration, and building use.

Appendix D. Transportation and Access

Transportation is a central design issue for any future Athens-Grafton structure because geography, family access, and receiving-school location affect Athens and Grafton differently.

Current Transportation

Current district route information shows morning pickups beginning before 7:00 a.m., with arrival at Grafton Elementary at approximately 7:45 a.m. Some students therefore already experience morning travel approaching 50 minutes. Afternoon travel can include additional routing and transfers.

The appropriate comparison for a future model is the change from the current transportation experience: whether routes become longer, less reliable, harder for families to manage, or less compatible with participation in activities beyond the regular school day.

Geographic Considerations

Grafton is more naturally oriented toward Chester and Saxtons River. Athens has stronger geographic connections toward Townshend, Westminster, and the surrounding road network.

This geography means that a single receiving-school arrangement could create substantially different transportation burdens for the two communities.

Transportation Research

Source	Population	Principal Finding	Relevance
Cordes, Rick, and Schwartz, 2022. "Do Long Bus Rides Drive Down Academic Outcomes?" Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis.	More than 120,000 New York City school bus riders	Long rides adversely affected attendance and chronic absenteeism among district-choice students	Supports considering ride duration as an educational access issue
Edwards, 2022. "Another One Rides the Bus." National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice.	Michigan public school students	Transportation eligibility reduced chronic absenteeism most clearly among economically disadvantaged students; no achievement effect was identified	Supports the importance of reliable transportation for families with fewer private resources

Source	Population	Principal Finding	Relevance
Ding, Li, Feng, and Pojani, 2023. "Do Long School Commutes Undermine Teenagers' Wellbeing? Evidence from a Nation-Wide Survey in China." <i>Journal of Transport & Health</i> , 30.	Nearly 7,500 students ages 12-19	Longer commutes were associated with reduced sleep, lower well-being, higher absenteeism, and weaker academic outcomes	Useful broader evidence about commute burden, with substantial limits in applying it to rural Vermont elementary students

Cordes, Rick, and Schwartz (2022) found adverse attendance and chronic-absence effects among district-choice students experiencing long bus rides. Edwards (2022) found that transportation eligibility reduced chronic absenteeism most clearly among economically disadvantaged students, while identifying no achievement effect. Ding et al. (2023) found effects on sleep, well-being, absenteeism, and academic performance among Chinese adolescents, but involved older students in a different national context.

Evaluation Criteria

Any future transportation model should be evaluated against:

- Student ride duration
- Route reliability
- Family transportation capacity
- Access to after-school and extracurricular programming
- Equity between Athens and Grafton

The research does not establish a universal maximum ride time that determines whether a school arrangement is appropriate.

Future route design should occur during the feasibility phase after receiving-school options are identified. That work should include actual route modeling rather than estimates based only on driving distance.

Appendix E. Neighboring School Comparison

The study reviewed Westminster Center School, Chester-Andover Elementary School, Townshend Elementary School, and Saxtons River Elementary School as comparative settings and, where applicable, possible receiving-school options.

Chester-Andover Elementary School

Chester-Andover operates at substantially larger scale than Grafton and provides multiple classrooms across grade levels, broader peer groups, specialist programming, extracurricular opportunities, after-school and summer programming, and outdoor education.

Its geography makes it a more plausible receiving-school direction for many Grafton students than for Athens students.

Townshend Elementary School

Townshend offers broader peer and program capacity than Grafton and is geographically more plausible for Athens. Available programming includes extracurricular and out-of-school opportunities and intervention support.

Westminster Center School

Westminster provides a larger K-6 setting within WNESU, broader staffing capacity, specialist programming, and a larger peer environment. Its transportation implications differ substantially between Athens and Grafton.

Saxtons River Elementary School

Saxtons River provides a useful comparison within WNESU and operates within a larger system with shared staffing and programming. Its current grade configuration limits its usefulness as a direct K-6 receiving option.

Appendix F. Vermont Comparable Cases

Readsboro

Readsboro Central School enrolled 37 students in PreK-6 during 2025-26. Voters approved closure in March 2026 after previously rejecting closure. The decision followed continued enrollment decline, facility concerns, and questions about peer interaction at very small scale.

The case also illustrates the importance of transition planning. Following the vote, some families reported uncertainty about receiving schools, transportation, programming, and services.

Marlboro

Marlboro School served approximately 50 students in PreK-8 before voters approved closure in March 2026. The resulting structure anticipated tuition replacing direct operation while transportation and some building costs continued.

Published information estimated the difference between the operating and non-operating budgets at approximately \$400,000 for the following year.

Direct discussion with longtime Board leadership emphasized communication, student experience, staff transition, and transportation planning.

Taconic and Green Regional School District

The Taconic and Green Regional School District Board voted in November 2025 to close Sunderland Elementary School and Currier Memorial School. Approximately 100 students from the two schools were expected to transition to the larger regional structure in Dorset.

The district reconfigured students, grades, and facilities within an existing regional system.

Jamaica

In 2026, Jamaica ended all operations at Jamaica Village School. The building had served as a preschool center for three- and four-year-olds from 2024 to 2026, while resident K-5 students shifted to Townshend Elementary School or NewBrook Elementary School.

Appendix G. Stakeholder Engagement

The study incorporated input from individuals and groups with different relationships to Grafton Elementary and the Athens-Grafton School District.

Stakeholder Group	Engagement
School administration	Interviews and school-based discussion
Classroom teachers	Individual and small-group interviews
Intervention, special education, counseling, health, and support staff	Interviews
Athens-Grafton School Board	Individual interviews and Board discussion
Selectboard representatives	Joint School Board/Selectboard discussion
Parents and families	Parent listening sessions and individual follow-up
Community members	Public Community Forum
Vermont comparison communities	Direct discussion and document review
District and supervisory union administration	Data requests and operational follow-up

Stakeholder input was used to identify recurring themes, test emerging findings, and understand differences in experience.

Individual comments were not treated as findings solely because one person raised them. Where perspectives differed, the report retains those differences and weighs them against other evidence.

The report does not attribute sensitive individual comments where doing so could compromise confidentiality or distract from the underlying institutional issue.

Appendix H. Legal and Governance Context

This appendix summarizes the principal statutory issues relevant to the pathways evaluated in this report and identifies governance requirements that should inform Board planning. It is not a legal opinion.

This summary reflects Vermont law and the state education reform framework in effect as of August 2026.

Current Elementary School Obligation

Under 16 V.S.A. Section 821, a Vermont school district generally must maintain one or more approved schools providing elementary education for its resident students in Kindergarten through Grade 6 unless an applicable statutory exception is used. One exception allows the electorate to authorize the school board to provide elementary education by paying tuition to one or more public elementary schools in one or more districts.

A transition from operating Grafton Elementary as the district's K-6 school to a districtwide public-school tuition model would therefore require voter authorization under the current statute.

Elementary Tuition

Under current 16 V.S.A. Section 823, the sending district pays tuition for resident elementary students attending a public elementary school. The statute also allows sending and receiving districts to enter tuition agreements under specified conditions.

Publicly funded tuition to approved independent elementary schools is subject to separate statutory requirements and payment limitations and should be evaluated independently from public-school tuition arrangements.

Partial Grade-Span or Regional Models

The statutes reviewed for this study do not provide a simple stand-alone mechanism that should be assumed to authorize any specific local-primary/regional-intermediate structure.

Because 16 V.S.A. Section 821 addresses the district's responsibility to provide elementary education across K-6, any model under which Athens-Grafton directly operates some grades while tuitioning or regionalizing others should receive specific legal review before implementation.

The report therefore treats legal and governance feasibility as a condition that must be demonstrated during the feasibility phase.

State Education Reform

Vermont's education governance and finance system remains in transition.

Act 73 of 2025 initiated major changes to the education finance, governance, and tuition framework. Current statutes include future provisions that are contingent on later effective dates. For example, Section 823 includes a future tuition structure potentially effective July 1, 2028 if statutory contingencies are met.

In 2026, H.955 became Act 170, titled An act relating to next steps in transforming Vermont's education system. The Governor approved the legislation on June 18, 2026. Act 170 continues and modifies the state's education transformation process and affects numerous statutory provisions relevant to district organization and future implementation decisions. (Vermont General Assembly, bill status H.955/Act 170)

The feasibility phase should therefore confirm the statutes, implementation timelines, and Agency guidance in effect when a structural decision is advanced.

Implications for Athens-Grafton

The legal review supports several planning conclusions:

- Continuing to operate Grafton Elementary remains an available option under current law.
- Moving to a districtwide public elementary tuition model requires voter authorization.
- Tuition obligations and receiving-school arrangements must be determined before a transition is implemented.
- A partial grade-span or regionalized structure requires specific legal and governance review.
- State education reform remains active, and the law in effect at the time of implementation must govern the final design.

District counsel should review any final structural proposal before the Board takes formal implementation action.

The appendices are intended to increase defensibility, not to lengthen the report. Full interview notes, raw Community Forum notes, a complete document inventory, and background research that did not materially affect the analysis are excluded by design.

Sources and References

District and Study Materials

- Athens-Grafton enrollment information and projections provided for the study
- Athens-Grafton FY23-FY27 financial information
- FY27 Athens-Grafton budget detail
- District transportation schedules and route information
- VT-CAP results provided for the study
- DIBELS results provided for the study
- NWEA MAP reports provided for the study
- Stakeholder interviews, parent sessions, Community Forum, and Board/Selectboard engagement conducted through the study

Transportation Research

- Cordes, Sarah A., Christopher Rick, and Amy Ellen Schwartz. "Do Long Bus Rides Drive Down Academic Outcomes?" *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 44(4), 2022, 689-716.
- Edwards, Danielle Sanderson. *Another One Rides the Bus: The Impact of School Transportation on Student Outcomes in Michigan*. National Center for Research on Education Access and Choice, 2022.
- Ding, Pengxiang, Yanli Li, Suwei Feng, and Dorina Pojani. "Do Long School Commutes Undermine Teenagers' Wellbeing? Evidence from a Nation-Wide Survey in China." *Journal of Transport & Health*, Vol. 30, 2023.

Vermont Legal and Policy Sources

- Vermont General Assembly, 16 V.S.A. Section 821
- Vermont General Assembly, 16 V.S.A. Section 823
- Vermont General Assembly, H.454, Act 73 (2025)
- Vermont General Assembly, H.955, Act 170 (2026)

Comparative and School Sources

- Vermont Public reporting on Readsboro, Marlboro, and Taconic and Green
- The Commons reporting on Marlboro
- The Deerfield Valley News reporting on Readsboro transition
- Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union, Taconic and Green "Future of Our Schools"
- Windham Central Supervisory Union and school websites
- Windham Northeast Supervisory Union and school websites
- Two Rivers Supervisory Union / Chester-Andover Elementary School