

# A Single Countywide School District? It Could Happen in the Berkshires

By DANIEL DeMAINA

Since 2000, public school enrollment in Berkshire County has dropped by one-fifth, and the county's school districts expect to lose another fifth over the next twenty years. Fewer students hasn't directly translated to savings, however. Facilities, in most cases, need to keep their doors open, and each classroom still needs a teacher, even if for fewer students. Operational costs keep going up and the range of services that must be provided—often mandated by state and federal laws—remains locked in place, while Chapter 70 funding and economies of scale erode.

The unsustainable situation led a task force of officials from across Berkshire County to make a bold recommendation: the creation of a single school district for all thirty-two cities and towns.

The Berkshire County Education Task Force released a report last summer making the unprecedented—in Massachusetts, at least—recommendation. The task force laid out five possible scenarios for the county's schools and acknowledged that while a single countywide school district would be the most difficult scenario to accomplish, it would yield the most benefits for students in terms of quality of education and services.

Task Force Chair John Hockridge, a member of the North Adams School Committee since 2001 and chair of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees Division VI, acknowledged that proposing such a drastic change has led to some skepticism.

"We've had some pushback certainly,



*The Berkshire County Education Task Force meets on July 15, 2017, as it prepares to finalize its report, which included a recommendation to form a single countywide school district.*

(Photo by Heather Bellow, courtesy of *The Berkshire Eagle*)

people that have said, 'What are you thinking?'" Hockridge said. "But we've had a lot of positive feedback also. They think it's a great idea, but ask, 'How are we going to get there?'"

The goal would be accomplished over time. Neighboring school districts would increasingly collaborate, sharing services and staff, and eventually creating smaller regional school districts. Then the small districts would begin working with other small districts, eventually merging as well.

"We're fully aware that it's going to take a few years to make that happen," Hockridge said. "People have to get to know each other and get comfortable, learn how we do things and how it can

work—and as they adjust, it all takes patience and time."

## A Growing Financial Challenge

A consolidation of Berkshire County school districts would take time, but task force members like Becket Town Administrator Edward Gibson said the financial challenges are already here. While facing the same population-loss trend as the other cities and towns in the county, Becket has seen volatility in its regional school district assessments. The town might see an assessment increase of 1 to 3 percent in some years, but last year's was 7.5 percent.

*continued on page 10*

*Daniel DeMaina is the MMA's Associate Editor.*

*continued from page 9*

“With tight municipal finances, the other piece of the puzzle is that we are concerned about sustainability and providing a quality education,” he said. “You have schools that might have been designed for 400 students that might have 220. Schools designed for a thousand students might have 600 or 700. You’re losing the economies of scale.”

In North Adams, Hockridge said, annual budget increases have remained conservative, in the neighborhood of 1 or 2 percent, but costs have risen much faster due to factors like health insurance and special education costs. The result has been teacher layoffs and fewer academic offerings, particularly electives and extracurricular activities.

“I’ve been on the School Committee for sixteen years, and when you look at the administrative level, we used to have a team of eleven administrators that are no longer there, like an information technology director, a curriculum specialist and coordinators, special education administration,” he said. The administrators that remain are taking on more responsibilities, a common theme in Berkshire County.

“It’s getting harder and harder to provide a quality education offering for our kids,” Hockridge said. “We’re just kind of reaching the cliff at this point for some of our school districts. It’s more than time to address the challenges.”

## **Hardest Road Provides Most Benefits**

The task force began addressing the challenge when it formed in July 2015, meeting every three weeks to explore options. Its Phase I report was issued in October 2016 in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute.

Based on the enrollment, cost, revenue and program trends detailed in the Phase I report and subsequent recommendations to explore more shared services and regionalization, the task force presented five scenarios in its Phase II report:

1. No changes
2. Three regional “modified supervisory unions” with shared central office staff but retaining local school committees

3. A single Berkshire County modified supervisory union

4. Three regional school districts

5. A single countywide school district

The task force initially zeroed in on option four, Hockridge said. But as discussions continued, members realized that a single countywide district, while ambitious, would improve upon the benefits of a three-district model.

Existing legislation and regulations also nudged the task force toward the single-district model, Gibson said. “When you started to look at the barriers to entry or exit under existing legislation, either joining or leaving a regional school district, it became apparent that the goal of maybe getting through a one-district system, although it might take fifteen or twenty years, actually made the most sense in working through all the rules and regulations and laws,” he said.

## **Early Adopters Wanted**

The key first step is having early adopters, Hockridge said. This is particularly necessary due to some degree of public skepticism about the benefits of further regionalization. The financial realities, however, are not improving.

Last year, Steve Hemman, assistant executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools, told the Pioneer Valley Regional District School Committee that intermunicipal agreements to share services may be the only option the financially struggling district has left. “You should start looking at (opportunities to share), because I don’t see things getting any easier,” Hemman said, according to the *Greenfield Recorder*. “I think you’re really going to be pushed into doing something. You’re not going to see any windfalls from the state.”

Hockridge said it’s important to support districts that are willing to explore collaborative options that could lead to formalized, consolidated school districts, whether regional school districts or modified school unions. “Once they get established and hopefully successful, that leads to further regionalization down the road,” he said. “That’s the way we think we get there.”

Gibson added that other areas of Massachusetts, such as Cape Cod, are dealing with the same issues and may be looking to the Berkshires as a potential model for solutions. “[The task force is] of the mindset that we’re not a decision-making body and can only make recommendations,” he said. “We hope by doing this that it starts talks between school districts on how we can make this work for all of us.”

Berkshire County may never actually get to the point of a single countywide district, Hockridge acknowledged. But the work to get there will still reap benefits for the students and schools of the county.

“The hope is that ten years from now we’re in a much better educational structure than we are now, where we can enhance the academic offerings for the kids and increase the financial stability of the school district,” he said. “Whether that be a countywide district or three or four regional districts, whatever shape that looks like, we feel the effort will lead to a much better situation than we have now.”

*The reports of the Berkshire County Education Task Force can be found at [berkshireeducation.org](http://berkshireeducation.org).* 🌸