



Connecticut River Collaborative

Planning Committee

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

JUNE 2023



Introduction

With all the changes and decisions facing our schools here in the North Country, many members of the disbanded Connecticut River Collaborative Planning Committee have received inquiries about our previous work regarding possible collaborative solutions to our common problems: declining enrollments, rising costs and the desire to provide our students with the best educational opportunities we can offer. It is clear there is still an interest in working together in some way to achieve these goals. This is a summary of our conclusions and recommendations.

A Brief History of Our Inquiry Into an Interstate School District

In March 2018, all local towns voted in favor of being part of a regional conversation to discuss the future of education. The Connecticut River Collaborative Exploratory Committee was formed to explore the options available to our communities with regard to educating our children.

The committee included New Hampshire School Administrative Unit 7 and its member school districts: Columbia, Colebrook, Stewartstown, Clarksville, Pittsburg; and Vermont Essex North Supervisory Union and its districts: Canaan Schools and NEK Choice. Twenty-one members, including one board member, one community member, and one optional member from each district began the volunteer work. The first meeting was in April 2018. The group first developed a mission statement to guide its work: “To increase educational offerings for all area students at a reasonable cost to taxpayers.”

The committee’s first major hurdle was reaching baseline agreements on some key topics. We spent many meetings hashing out critical issues like how best to distribute students geographically,



how to make use of our existing facilities, and how to structure a unified district and curriculum. It was difficult to achieve broad agreement on many of these issues, so we went through a two-step process of building consensus among our group and our communities before we sought formal statutory recognition as an interstate planning committee. This two step approach allowed for the best use of volunteer time and other resources.

In fall 2019, the Connecticut River Collaborative Exploratory Committee received endorsement by the commissioners of education



10+
Years in
Discussion



21
Committee
Members



Two
Models
Eventually
Emerg



in Vermont and New Hampshire to become a formal interstate district planning committee called the Connecticut River Collaborative Planning Committee (CRCPC). The CRCPC was tasked with (1) either following the statutory steps to vote on and establish an interstate school district, or (2) concluding that a consensus on an agreement was not there, and to disband and conclude our work.

The conclusion to our efforts came after years of work and hundreds of hours of meetings. Our committee narrowed down more than 26 educational models to a deep dive into two models (called models C & D) in early 2021, focusing on high school regionalization as the priority. In an effort to utilize existing space and contain costs, there was strong agreement in our work for “no new roofs” and to utilize the existing buildings we had. We did explore the option of a brand new facility in a neutral location, but that was cost prohibitive and would lead to severe underutilization of existing buildings.

When the planning committee was officially recognized in Fall 2019, it had two tasks:

- 1 Either follow the statutory steps to vote on and establish an interstate school district, OR
- 2 Conclude that a consensus on an interstate agreement was not there, and disband and conclude our work.

Facts & Findings Toward the End of the Committee’s Work



MODEL C called for a regional high school located in Canaan, Vermont, and required renovations to the facility.



MODEL D called for a regional high school in Colebrook, New Hampshire, and required an addition to the facility.



Detailed financial studies were completed on the two models. After deep exploration on these models we neared a crucial point.

How Did the CRCPC Conclude its Work and Where Does it Stand Now?

Around the time the planning committee was closing in on its recommendations, Colebrook was facing a potential increase in students due to the expansion of a local business. The Colebrook Building Expansion Committee was considering its options to redesign the facility to meet this growth, when an uncommon opportunity surfaced to gain potential state-level funding support for the project. The building committee decided to include an additional area career and technical education center to the expansion plan. Regionalization was not explicitly included in the expansion planning.

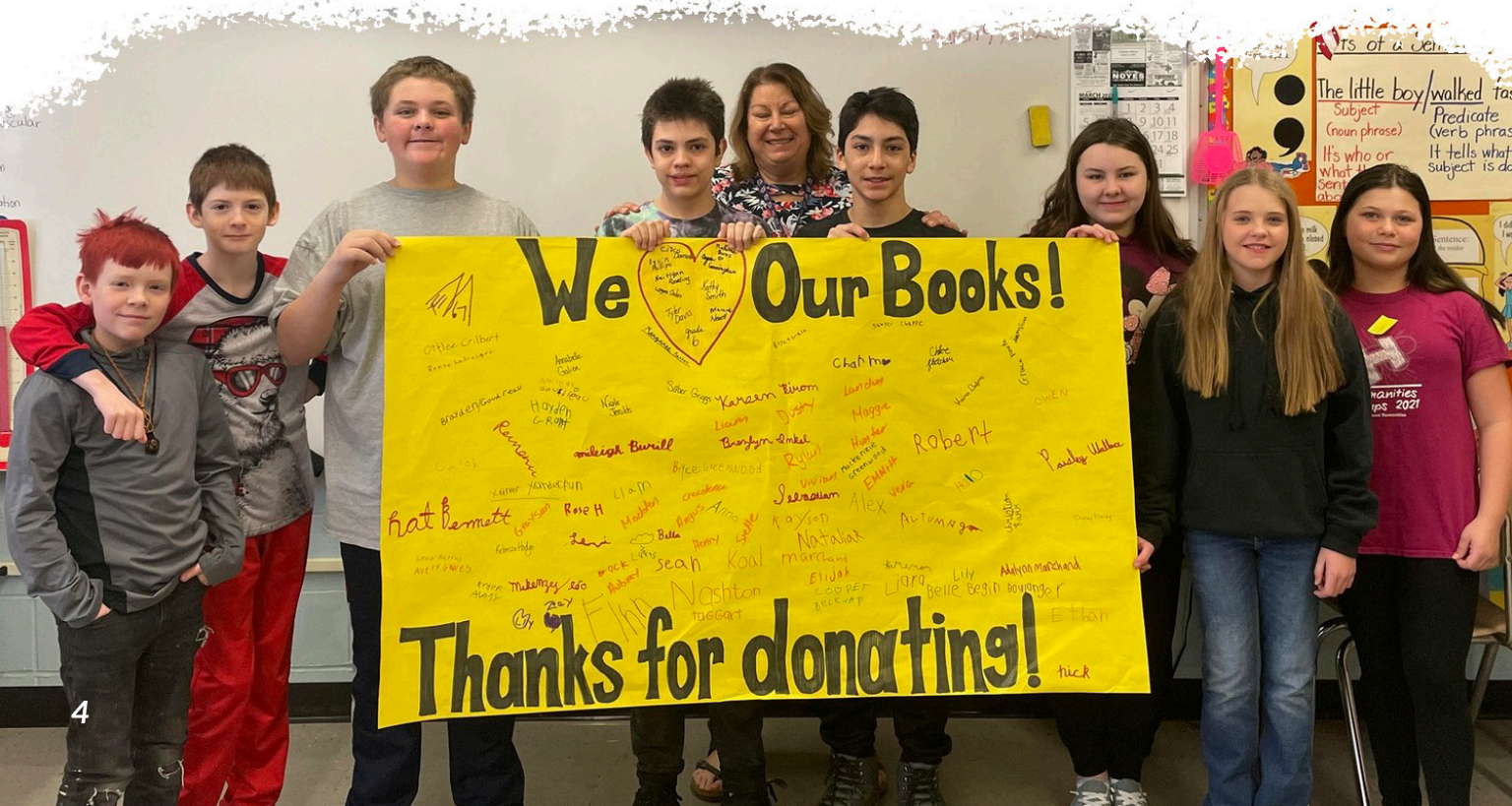
This decision greatly impacted our final two models, and our work stalled. When this became a serious exploration for Colebrook, some aspects of our models were now a question mark. On January 6, 2022, we held a meeting and a formal vote to decide whether to present

one of the options – C or D – or vote to present “no option” at this time. We voted to put forth “no option” and to disband the committee.

It has been said we could not come to a decision on a location. The reality is that we did not have the opportunity to put options C or D out there, and we didn’t know what the Colebrook building exploration would become. Also, without an obvious solution for governance and financials, it became clear that an interstate agreement would not pass a “yes” or “no” vote in ALL of our communities (as required by statute) at the time.

While we remain disbanded as an official interstate planning committee, we are maintaining a website to preserve and make available all notes, documents and studies in a single location in hopes that this information will help move the work forward.

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Revisiting Our Options

What is an Interstate School District?

An interstate school district combines schools from more than one state into a single district that can take advantage of the strengths of all its members and offset the challenges.

One of the biggest hurdles the committee faced in its initial work was local opposition to the formation of an interstate school district.

We are faced with a unique geographic situation in this area as we look at ways to regionalize education and share resources. We have several towns and two high schools on the New Hampshire side of the river and several towns and one high school on the Vermont side of the river. Forming an interstate district is not unprecedented; there are two other successful interstate school districts, namely Hanover and Rivendell schools.

If we want to move forward with a regional collaboration in this area, an interstate school district is one of the ways we could do it. If an interstate agreement were to be ratified and adopted, that allows for the formation of a single school district to govern and fund a shared regional school. These agreements typically feature one school board made up of representatives from each community to balance out representation and governance. The agreement also covers all the things that the two states do differently: educational standards, retirement programs for teachers, funding and special education. Perhaps most importantly for voters, the agreement also spells out how an interstate district is funded by the taxpayers of each community.

Interstate agreements can be tailored to fit what works best for the region and allow for some flexibility, but they do require some compromise and willingness to work together. The next segment of this document will detail the financial obstacles that need to be solved.



What Were the Biggest Obstacles to a Regional Educational Solution?

Compromise and the willingness to work together to collaborate across state lines was just not there at times. There was a vocal resistance to the idea of interstate governance involving Vermont in many of the communities on the New Hampshire side of the river. The feedback we received indicated that communities might be generally hesitant to give up local control and decisionmaking to a larger collaborative board.

Another obstacle that became clear during the detailed financial study we commissioned was the very different ways the two states fund education. No matter how you draw up your interstate agreement, each state's contribution towards educating their portion of the students comes off the top. What Vermont contributes comes off the top of what it costs to educate the students from Vermont and what New Hampshire contributes comes off the top of what it costs to educate the New Hampshire students.

This becomes evident when apportioning taxes to the respective communities because Vermont contributes significantly more money per student than New Hampshire does. This is just an unavoidable difference in the way the states each fund education, but it created poor optics when we examined the effect a regional collaboration would have on taxes in each community.

The financial model we were presented from

RHR Smith highlighted this funding stream inequity and led to serious concerns about acceptance from taxpayers. We need to go into any future discussions with a clear understanding of what a regional educational effort would mean for local taxpayers in each community. We have detailed financial studies available to help paint this picture for voters.

Geography and facilities were also an issue. We originally identified Canaan as a good location for the high school given its central location for the student population, a successful existing CTE center with land assets and infrastructure, and extra space. But there were concerns about the age and physical condition of the buildings and who would pick up the tab for required renovations. Colebrook had a newer facility but one that was already crowded and less centrally located, with less space for land assets and infrastructure to support CTE. We also explored new construction, as it has lots of merits, but it was prohibitively expensive, involved land acquisition and left the question of what to do with the existing facilities.

One obstacle that can't be ignored: when we were gaining steam on the project, we had to change to Zoom meetings for a while as a result of COVID, and as we all know, it is very different than being in a room together. We are happy these times are behind us, and we recommend in-person work.

Some Initial Concerns from the Community About a Regional Solution



**Fear of Losing
Local Control**



**Differences in State
Funding Models**



**Geography
and Facilities**

Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal here is to leave you with a clear understanding of where our work concluded and why. We remain hopeful that there is a collaborative solution out there that will work for our students and communities. We want all the work that has been done to be available to those interested in moving this initiative forward. A regional solution makes so much sense for the North Country. It's just a matter of how we get there from here. We feel getting all our high school kids together will provide them the best education. Our recommendations follow.

- 01** Renew a regional discussion for our kids, our future, and our communities.
- 02** Ask which school districts support continuing the discussion of an interstate district?
- 03** Add this topic as a standing school board agenda item in each district.
- 04** Engage community stakeholders across all age groups in committee work and at meetings. Include more voices in the discussion.
- 05** Establish a subcommittee to bring together conversations from individual district discussions and advance potential educational improvements. Ideally this will include one board member from each school district: Columbia, Colebrook, Stewartstown, Clarksville, Pittsburg, Canaan and NEK Choice.
- 06** Base all high school CTE and traditional academic classes on a single campus. Statistics show that when these classes are located together, more than 90% of students participate in both tracks. If the campuses are separate, fewer than 10% of students participate in both tracks. This is a significant statistic pointing to the benefit of the single campus model, thus providing exponential pathways for all students.
- 07** Retain small local elementary schools. Although we identified clear benefits with including a true middle school model, it is more likely to have full participation at the high school level. We recommend focusing regionalization efforts at the high school level.
- 08** Conduct further exploration around other creative and equitable financial models.
- 09** Establish an inclusive governance structure that provides representation of all participating communities. We believe it's possible that if our school district boards designed a structure that is agreeable and beneficial to all stakeholders, the Departments of Education would help find a pathway to make this a reality.
- 10** Include students representing broadly diverse views and pursuits in this work. Solutions that meet the mission statement could be project-based in regional cohorts.
- 11** Engage students to work on solutions for consolidating co-curriculars and electives. Having more participants in these activities will lead to better opportunities for outcomes, growth, and learning. One of our committee members, a retired teacher, always reminded us of the importance of experiential learning in high-interest areas: "When students smell the work of the Family Consumer Science classroom, they take the class!"
- 12** Work together as school districts to address the issue of staff shortages. Instead of competing for staff, there is an opportunity to retain the best qualified staff and expose all students to the highest level of learning in every subject while providing continuity and stability in the classroom.

Summary

It's time to ask ourselves the question: "If we started fresh today, would we build three high schools for 250 students?"

Our communities must broach the practical steps to school collaboration or regionalization, and local stakeholder districts should work together to untangle the clash of educational and financial concerns. The public has expressed a desire for transparency and accountability in this work. A critical step is to include the voice of as many members of the community as possible.

There may be a river and a state line between our towns, but we live as a neighborhood. Our students are ready to be together. The question is, how much longer do we wait to create a better educational system so they can learn together while providing the public with more value for their money?



We will update our website with our work: [Visit **connecticutrivercollaborative.org**](https://connecticutrivercollaborative.org)!

**This report is respectfully submitted by the
June 2023 Summary Document Subcommittee**

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Several committee members have expressed a willingness to be available for questions or to participate in any way that is helpful to future progress.



**Connecticut River
Collaborative**
Planning Committee