

Report of the Mont Vernon Middle School Study Committee

Presented to the Mont Vernon School Board

January 21, 2022

Introduction

The Mont Vernon School District (MVSD) maintains a Kindergarten through 6th (K-6) at the Mont Vernon Village School (MVVS). Mont Vernon is also a member of the Souhegan Cooperative School District (SCSD) which operates the Souhegan Cooperative High School (Souhegan) for the Town's grades 9 through 12. SCSD is jointly operated by The Towns of Amherst and Mont Vernon, and the Souhegan Cooperative School Board has members from both Towns.

Mont Vernon does not own or operate a middle school for their grades 7 and 8, and we are not part of a cooperative district for these students. Mont Vernon has relied on tuitioning these grades to another district for 40 or more years, initially to Milford and since 1992, to the Amherst Middle School (AMS). This is formalized under a Tuition Agreement between the MVSB and the Amherst School Board (ASB). The current Agreement took effect on November 3, 2021, and will expire after a five-year term on June 30, 2025, with a mutual option to extend for another five years to June 30, 2031. It should be noted that the three school boards; MVSB, SCSB, and ASB makeup School Administrative Unit (SAU) 39.

Amherst is embarking on a sizable capital campaign to renovate their middle school and elementary schools. The voters of Amherst will be considering whether to authorize the issuance of bonds in the sum of over \$84 million dollars, of which \$30,492,000 will be expended for AMS reconstruction and renovation and \$900,000 will be expended on the installation of a solar power at AMS. Under the existing tuition agreement, Mont Vernon will be obliged to pay for a portion of these capital improvements.

In 2021, the MVSB convened a committee known as the Mont Vernon Middle School Study Committee (MSSC or "Committee") to review the current middle school agreement.

The Committee consisted of the following residents:

- Peter King, Chairperson
- Dagmar Vlahos, Vice Chairperson
- Autumn Grdina, Secretary
- Anne Dodd
- Jennifer Heneberry
- Craig Wiley
- Andrew Stokinger
- Howard Brown, Selectboard Representative (non-voting)
- Charline Brown, Teachers Representative (non-voting)

The Committee wishes to thank the Mont Vernon School Board for their support; Danae Marotta for preparing the meeting minutes; Abby Wallace for providing administrative support; Roger Preston, Christine Landwehrle, and Amy Facey and the SAU staff for providing technical input; and Eileen Naber for keeping everyone on track.

Charge of the Mont Vernon Middle School Study Committee

The charge of the MSSC was:

1. Do we continue the Tuition agreement and absorb the additional capital costs?
2. Do we bring the 7th and 8th grade students back, take the capital costs that could have gone into the town of Amherst, do something on this building (MVVS) and educate K-8?
3. Is there anything else that is not being considered?

Information from the Committee was published on the SAU 39 Website [SAU 39/Committees/MV Middle School Study Committee \(MSSC\)](#). The Committee met publicly at the MVVS library on six occasions:

- November 3, 2021
- November 17, 2021
- November 30, 2021
- December 14, 2021
- January 5, 2022
- January 18, 2022

Landscape of Existing Conditions

In order to establish firm base conditions for the study, the Committee developed a “Landscape” of the existing conditions. This included identifying “customers” and “stakeholders”. Customers are those that receive the output of what they are trying to do. Stakeholders are people who care about what they are doing but are not impacted by the end product.

- The Customers are the Mont Vernon school age residents (Homeschool/Mont Vernon School Children)

- The Stakeholders are the Mont Vernon school age residents (Homeschool/Mont Vernon school children), Mont Vernon Taxpayers, Mont Vernon Parents, SAU39 School Board, MVSB, Amherst School Board, Teachers at both AMS and Mont Vernon, Administrators of SAU39, Amherst school age residents (Homeschool/Amherst school children), Amherst taxpayers.

The Committee requested information and documents from the SAU and this information is posted on the Committee webpage.

Existing Mont Vernon/Amherst Tuition Agreement

With respect to Mont Vernon's obligations for Capital Improvements, the current Agreement States:

I. CHARGES FOR LONG-TERM DEBT OBLIGATIONS FOR CAPITAL EXPENDITURES.

The Amherst and Mont Vernon School Boards agree to allocate the responsibility for existing and future long-term debt obligations for capital expenditures at the Amherst Middle School as follows:

(Section 1. Pertains to preexisting capital costs and is omitted here)

2. Contribution Toward Future Capital Improvements.

This provision shall apply to long-term debt obligations incurred beginning with fiscal year 2012. The Mont Vernon School District's annual contribution toward future long-term debt obligations shall be limited to long-term debt obligations incurred to fund capital improvements to the Amherst Middle School only.

- a. Calculation of Mont Vernon's Annual Contribution Toward Future Capital Expenditures for the Amherst Middle School. Mont Vernon's payment shall consist of its proportionate share of the principal and interest of the current fiscal year cost of said long-term debt. Mont Vernon's annual proportionate share of the principal and interest of the long-term debt payment shall be calculated as follows: ((the principal and interest of the current fiscal year cost of the long-term debt) minus (all appropriate funds that the Amherst School District is eligible to receive,
- b. including but not limited to, school building aid)) multiplied by ((the number of Mont Vernon students in attendance at Amherst Middle School on October 1st) divided by (the total number of students in attendance at Amherst Middle School on October 1st less the number of tuition students not covered by this agreement), expressed as a percentage) equals Mont Vernon's proportionate share.

Proposed AMS Project

Our understanding of the existing project (main project only without the solar upgrade) is as follows:

- Bond Principal plus Interest ranges from a high of \$2,028,070 in FY24 to a low of \$1,065,020 in FY52 (excluding partial year FY23)
- Less School Building Aid (assumed to be zero, The State of NH has not funded this program since 2009)
- Divided by total AMS population to result in a Capital Cost per Student that ranges from \$3,932 to \$2,139 (Excluding partial year FY23)
- Times the number of Mont Vernon 7-8 grade students (assumed to be 60, based on current average)

Note that the AMS currently hosts grades 5-8, an average of 629 students. Amherst intends to move their current grade 5 to the proposed elementary school resulting in the number of total students decreasing to 498. The cost model below does not assume any population or trend shifts; therefore, Mont Vernon remains at 60 students. The shift of the Amherst 5th grade out of AMS will have the impact of increasing Mont Vernon's share of the middle school capital cost from 9.5% of the Estimated Total AMS Bond Payment to 12% in Fiscal Year 26. Full year costs for Mont Vernon will range between a low of \$128,316 in FY52 and a high of \$235,907 in FY 26 (excluding partial year in FY23). In addition to an estimated per student tuition cost of approximately \$22,500, Mont Vernon is also obligated under the existing agreement to pay a portion of the AMS building capital costs. The following table provided by the SAU outlines Mont Vernon's share of these capital costs, averaging \$3,588 per student per year for the first 10 full years bringing the average cost to tuition a student to AMS to over \$26,000 per year.

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	Estimated Total AMS Bond Payment	AMS Total Enrollment Projected	Mont Vernon 7 th & 8 th Grade Students	Capital Cost Per Student	Capital Cost Charged to Mont Vernon
FY23	\$789,896	629	60	\$1,256	\$75,348
FY24	\$2,028,070	629	60	\$3,224	\$193,457
FY25	\$1,993,050	629	60	\$3,169	\$190,116
FY26	\$1,958,030	498	60	\$3,932	\$235,907
FY27	\$1,923,010	498	60	\$3,861	\$231,688
FY28	\$1,887,990	498	60	\$3,791	\$227,469
FY29	\$1,852,970	498	60	\$3,721	\$223,249
FY30	\$1,817,950	498	60	\$3,651	\$219,030
FY31	\$1,782,930	498	60	\$3,580	\$214,811
FY32	\$1,747,910	498	60	\$3,510	\$210,592
FY33	\$1,712,890	498	60	\$3,440	\$206,372
FY34	\$1,677,870	498	60	\$3,369	\$202,153
FY35	\$1,642,850	498	60	\$3,299	\$197,934
FY36	\$1,607,830	498	60	\$3,229	\$193,714
FY37	\$1,572,810	498	60	\$3,158	\$189,495
FY38	\$1,537,790	498	60	\$3,088	\$185,276
FY39	\$1,502,770	498	60	\$3,018	\$181,057
FY40	\$1,467,750	498	60	\$2,947	\$176,837
FY41	\$1,432,730	498	60	\$2,877	\$172,618
FY42	\$1,397,710	498	60	\$2,807	\$168,399
FY43	\$1,362,690	498	60	\$2,736	\$164,180
FY44	\$1,327,670	498	60	\$2,666	\$159,960
FY45	\$1,292,650	498	60	\$2,596	\$155,741
FY46	\$1,257,630	498	60	\$2,525	\$151,522
FY47	\$1,222,610	498	60	\$2,455	\$147,302
FY48	\$1,187,590	498	60	\$2,385	\$143,083
FY49	\$1,152,570	498	60	\$2,314	\$138,864
FY50	\$1,117,550	498	60	\$2,244	\$134,645
FY51	\$1,082,530	498	60	\$2,174	\$130,425
FY52	\$1,065,020	498	60	\$2,139	\$128,316
Total Mont Vernon Obligation to the AMS Capital Improvements					\$5,349,560

Identification of Alternatives

The Committee reviewed several alternatives for educating Mont Vernon's 7th and 8th graders including:

- remaining at AMS (Charge No. 1),
- creating our own 7th and 8th grade system (Charge No. 2), and
- other options or considerations (Charge No. 3).

1. Mont Vernon Students remain at AMS

To address Objective 1 of the Committee's charge, the Committee looked at continuing to keep our students at AMS and identified Pros, Cons, and other Considerations.

PROS:

- Consistency
- Sports/extracurricular opportunities
- Integration with Amherst students that will carry on to Souhegan High School
- More resources than we could provide in our own K-8
- Social growth for children who have been with the same peer group since K
- Community relationships
- Electives would not be practical with a smaller K-8
- Foreign languages and advanced academic classes

CONS:

- Unpredictable Costs
- No equity in the building projects that we are paying for
- No say in future expenditures or costs
- No control of educational decisions, class size, programming
- No say in teacher union contract negotiations
- No say in building project
- No school board representation

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

The current agreement between Mont Vernon and Amherst includes an "escape clause". Mont Vernon may terminate this Agreement at the end of the fiscal year of the third full school year after it gives written notice to the Amherst School Board that the Mont Vernon School District has voted to educate its seventh and eighth grade students in Mont Vernon. This means that we are currently obligated to the Agreement for at least three years.

Impact of Timing on the Amherst Bond

The Committee discussed Amherst's proposed construction and bonding schedule. Our understanding of the current plan is to sequentially demolish and construct portions of the existing Wilkins school using a phased process for the first 3 to 4 years of a five-year project and begin the AMS project only after the new elementary school is completed and the Amherst 5th graders can be moved from AMS to the elementary school. This will open up space in AMS to allow the renovations to proceed in year 4 and 5 of their construction schedule. The proposed multi-school project will be financed by a single bond of between \$82,170,000 and \$84,370,000. The Committee identified the following disadvantages to Mont Vernon under this arrangement. First, Mont Vernon will be paying bond costs of almost \$700,000 before construction will begin at AMS. These costs represent primarily interest costs, which would be avoided if the middle school project would be bonded in FY27 when the project is ready for construction. Secondly, the Committee was concerned that any cost or schedule overruns for the elementary school project would directly impact the middle school project. The Committee felt that the elementary project contains considerable project risk because it involves multi-year phased construction on an occupied site. The Committee is concerned that any cost overruns for the elementary school project would be deducted from the middle school project. Further, delaying any expenditure of funds for the middle school renovations adds considerable uncertainty to the costs four to five years from now, given the current trend of inflationary construction costs. Given the current Mont Vernon and Amherst agreement, we believe it would be beneficial to Mont Vernon for the AMS project to be funded with its own bond, to be issued at the time of the proposed construction and not years prior.

2. Mont Vernon to Operate Grades 7 and 8

To address Objective 2 of the Committee's charge, the Committee considered the possibility of Mont Vernon developing a program for their 7-8 grades. The Committee found that there were fewer NH Department of Education requirements for a K-8 program than there would be in a "middle school" therefore a K-8 model was assumed. It was noted that this didn't necessarily mean that the additional grades would have to be added to the existing building, but it would have to be managed under the existing administrative structure. There would be certification requirements for advanced grade teachers. The Committee understands that only a few of the existing teachers maintain credentials to teach at a middle school level. We also understand that additional classes beyond the core subjects would be required, one being health, which is currently not offered at the Village School.

The SAU provided the following outline showing the additional full time equivalent (FTE) staff that would be required if Mont Vernon was to add grades 7 and 8.

FTEs Needed for 7-8

Teacher	Current FTE	Additional FTEs for 7-8	Notes
7 STEM	0	1	At AMS we mainly have middle school certified teachers teaching Math, Science, Social Studies, and English. If we added 7 th and 8 th grade to MVVS, we would be looking for K-8 certified teachers which can be difficult to find (that certification is no longer issued). We could hire a teacher with a middle school math certification for STEM and have them teach outside their content area for science. We could do the same with English.
7 Humanities	0	1	
8 STEM	0	1	
8 Humanities	0	1	

Specialists (art, music, PE, etc.)

Specialist	Current FTE	Additional FTEs for 7-8	Notes
Art	.4	.2	
Music	.4	.2	May need additional stipends for more co-curricular activities
PE	.6	.4	Would need a PE/Health teacher so health can be taught. 1.0 would keep contact time the same as now but a 1.0 PE and a .2 Health would allow for additional PE time (<i>closer to what is offered at AMS</i>)
Spanish	.6	.4	This would allow for K-5 to remain at current contact time and 6-8 to get Spanish every other day (consistent with what AMS currently has for 6-8)
Library/Tech	1.0	0	Library collection would need to be expanded to include appropriate books/resources through grade8.

This would provide specialists needed at a K-8 elementary school, not a middle school.

Related Service Providers / Special Educators /Interventionists

Specialist	Current FTE	Additional FTEs for 7-8	Notes
OT	.4	.2	Could be more, depends on need
PT			Currently We have no students who require PT - impossible to estimate as it is determined by need - we would likely need one day per week
Speech	1.0	0	We anticipate that a 1.0 would be adequate but it depends on student need.
School Psychologist	.5	.5	
Guidance	1.0	0	We anticipate a 1.0 would be adequate but it depends on the number of students on 504 plans.
Special Educators	3.0	1.0	Again, depends upon student need
Nurse	1.0	0	We anticipate that a 1.0 will be adequate but it depends on student needs and current health conditions.
Reading Specialist / Math Interventionist	2.0	0	2.0 would be adequate to service our students needing intervention, we would not be able to utilize our interventionists for coaching or enrichment.

Other Staffing Needs

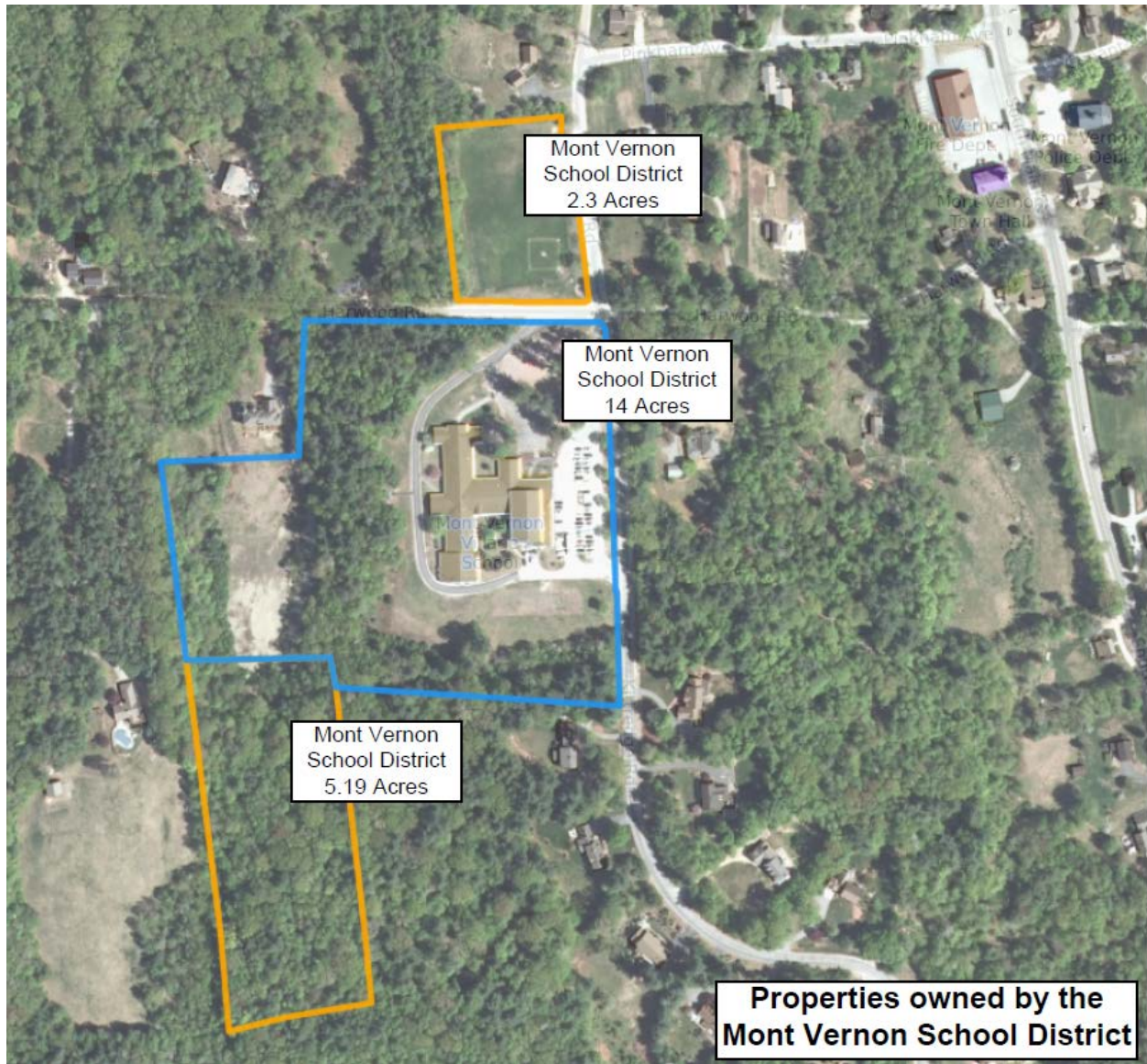
Staff Member	Current FTE	Additional FTEs for 7-8	Notes
Lunch/Recess monitors	0	At least one lunch/recess monitor	If we add one more grade level to each lunch, we will have very large lunches and recess. We would need additional staffing to support lunch and recess.
Office Staff	2	0	We anticipate being able to continue without additional office staff, but additional summer days will be needed for both office staff given the increased number of students. (They are not year-round employees; they work school days and a few additional summer days).
IT	.5	.5	Given that grades 7 and 8 would be 1:1 for devices, that's a large increase in the total number of devices and a greater need for real-time tech support.
Food Service			No Change
Custodians	1 FTE, 2 PTE	1.0 FTE	Current 1- 8hr, 1- 5 hr, 1- 6 hr Increase would be based on sq/ft increase (18,000 - 20,000 sq/ft per employee would be the goal)

Expanding Mont Vernon's program to add grades 7 and 8 would require a minimum of 8.4 FTE.

The Committee discussed that a minimum of four additional classrooms would be recommended to facilitate two additional grades. The Committee considered whether the existing parcel would allow construction of additional classrooms to accommodate the 7th and 8th grades. The Committee did not attempt to determine whether there was sufficient space on the property to construct additional classrooms as this would be the responsibility of a professional architect or engineer. The Committee noted that there was considerable unoccupied space on the school parcel located to the south and west of the existing school. There was a debate regarding the ownership of the parcel to the north of the school known as McCollom Field. Eileen Naber provided information that revealed that the McCollom Field property was conveyed by Quitclaim

Deed from the Trustees of the McCollom Institute to the Mont Vernon School District in May of 1990.

The following figure shows the property owned by the Mont Vernon School District.



The Committee outlined the following pros and cons to establishing a program in Mont Vernon for grades 7 and 8.

PROS:

- Avoid cost of tuition and Amherst building construction bond
- Set our own schedule (to match the grade K-6 schedule)
- Local control of curriculum, class size and cost
- Could size larger (add 8 classrooms instead of 4) and attract tuition students from other districts
- Full time staff for some support staff (hard to retain current part time positions)
- Less bus time
- Attract quality teachers
- Opportunity for advanced classes

CONS:

- Lose middle school activities, smaller school with fewer opportunities
- Lose AMS sports
- This would take several years to develop a program and we are bound by at least three years for any escape from the existing agreement
- Not enough current staff to operate these grades
- Lose McCollom field if construction is on this parcel

The Committee also considered the alternative of renting space instead of building classrooms. Although there is no rental property available in Mont Vernon, there appears to be vacant retail and office space in the area. These spaces could be converted into classroom space. The Committee looked at Pros and Cons of this alternative.

PROS:

- Avoided cost of tuition and Amherst Bond
- Lower upfront costs
- Quick occupancy (within one year)

CONS:

- Costs may vary
- No long term cost stability
- Transporting staff between MVVS and middle school
- Additional staffing
- Additional bussing

A further option along this line was to consider “renting” space in the Souhegan High School Annex. We understand that Souhegan is currently below its design capacity and may have space available. The advantage of this option is that we would be “paying ourselves” for the percentage that the payment would go back to Mont Vernon. This would also benefit the Amherst taxpayers, for the share of rent payments that would go to Amherst. This option would not increase bus costs because existing high school routes could be used. This option was not fully explored.

3. Other Considerations

In accordance with Objective 3 of the Committee’s charge, several other alternatives were identified, as presented below. These alternatives are not fully developed.

Mont Vernon to Tuition to another Middle School.

The Committee considered the possibility of sending our 7-8 grades to another middle school such as New Boston, Milford, Goffstown or Wilton/Lyndeborough but did not seriously look at this option based on the disruption of having Mont Vernon 6th graders transition to a new peer group only to have them transition to another new peer group at SHS two years later. In addition, this alternative would require additional bus time and cost.

Reopen and renegotiate middle school agreement with Amherst

The Committee felt that renegotiation of the middle school agreement could address some of the concerns of the option to stay with AMS.

Tuition Mont Vernon students to their Choice of Public or Private Schools

The Committee discussed the possibility of offering parents a choice of attending AMS or another school of their choice with Tuition to another school being no greater than the AMS base tuition. Students who chose this option would decrease the number of Mont Vernon students being charged tuition and capital costs for AMS (up to \$26,500 per student per year). The Committee did not fully develop this alternative but noted that at least one community in New Hampshire (Warren), offers parents the choice of two public and two private high schools, with the Town paying a base tuition no greater than the lowest public tuition. The Committee speculated that our current base tuition to Amherst may be more than that of other nearby public or private schools.

Next Steps

The Committee believes that it has completed the charge presented to it by the Mont Vernon School Board. This is an issue that will require careful consideration by the School Board, the stakeholders, and customers as identified above. The Committee has developed a flow chart that could assist with identifying the next steps for this process.

