

## School District Consolidation FAQ

*Updated 10/24/2016*

***What are the financial benefits/estimated savings if we consolidate school districts? Will savings continue year over year?***

***What are the financial benefits and/or risks associated with consolidating school districts? For example, SAU 39 has three districts, one non-union district and two union districts (2 different unions). What is the range of increased costs/reduced costs associated with all staff being non-union vs all staff union #1, all staff union #2?***

***If March 2017 voters approve consolidation to a single district, when will the consolidated district be in place?***

***Is New Hampshire's population growth rate declining?***

Yes. During the 1970s, '80s and '90s, the state's population grew each decade by 20% or more. This growth rate ended abruptly in the early 2000s, slowing to 6.5% from 2000 - 2010. NH's population growth rate is expected to continue to decline to 3.3% by 2020. (NH Center for Public Policy, US Census Bureau)

***When did declining school enrollment begin in New Hampshire?***

The number of students enrolled in schools across New Hampshire has decreased for 14 consecutive years, beginning in 2002-03. This decline is across public, private and charter schools. A 2015 study determined that all but 31 of the 161 school districts are experiencing declining enrollment. (NH Department of Education, New Hampshire Housing Authority)

***Will NH school enrollment continue to decline? What are the major drivers of declining school enrollment?***

Yes, NH school enrollment is declining in all but 31 of the 161 NH school districts (NH Department of Education, NH Housing Authority, 2015). In fact, Hillsborough County is the county experiencing the most significant drop in students enrolled in public schools. All three school districts in Amherst and Mont Vernon are experiencing declining school enrollment.

Key drivers of declining school enrollment in New Hampshire include

- A NH population with fewer young families
  - ✓ In the early 2000s, the number of young families moving into NH began to decline significantly. This trend is projected to continue.

- ✓ An increasing number of families are migrating out of NH for job opportunities.
- ✓ Many NH high school graduates attend out-of-state colleges and do not return to NH to live and work.
- Lower birth rates: The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which monitors state-level birth rates, reports that New Hampshire now has the nation's lowest birth rate.
- Aging population in NH: New Hampshire is aging at a faster rate than many states.

Sources: US Census Data, The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire

### ***How are changing demographic trends impacting school enrollment in Hillsborough County?***

Hillsborough County is experiencing the most significant drop in public school enrollment in NH. For the 10-year period 2005-2015, Hillsborough County public school enrollment decreased from 66,891 to 58,840. (*New Hampshire Department of Education*)

### ***How quickly is public school enrollment declining in Amherst and Mont Vernon?***

Peak Amherst and Mont Vernon enrollment was in FY 2005, with 2,983 students enrolled in grades 1 -12. Lowest enrollment occurred in FY 2016, with 2,271 students enrolled in grades 1-12. This represents a 24% reduction in grades 1 - 12 enrollment over the 15-year period from FY 2005 - FY 2016. Enrollment in pre-K (Amherst School District) and Kindergarten (Amherst School District and Mont Vernon School District) were excluded in this comparison because pre-K and Kindergarten was not offered in all 15 years. (Source: SAU 39 Superintendent's Office)

### ***How are the Amherst and Mont Vernon public schools and districts currently configured?***

*Three school districts oversee public school education in Amherst and Mont Vernon.*

1. The **Amherst School District (ASD)** includes grades Pre K - 8 with an elementary school and a middle school. The five-member Amherst School District (ASD) Board oversees grades Pre K - 8.
2. The **Mont Vernon School District (MVSD)** includes grades K - 6 with an elementary school. The five-member Mont Vernon School District Board (MSDB) oversees grades K - 6. Mont Vernon students participate in three districts over their public education experience. Mont Vernon students attend K- 6 at the Mont Vernon Village School, are tuitioned into the Amherst Middle School for grades 7 & 8 and attend Souhegan High School for grades 9 - 12.
3. The **Souhegan Cooperative School District (SCSD)** includes grades 9 - 12 at Souhegan High School. The seven-member Souhegan Cooperative School District (SCSD) Board oversees grades 9 - 12. Amherst students are represented on the Souhegan Cooperative School District by five board members elected by Amherst voters. Mont Vernon students are represented on the Souhegan Cooperative School District (SCSD) Board by two board members elected by Mont Vernon voters. Amherst and Mont Vernon students in grades 9-12 attend Souhegan High School (SHS). Amherst and Mont Vernon residents own proportional shares of Souhegan High School's operating and capital improvement budgets. The two towns use a cost sharing formula to share Souhegan High School

operating and capital improvement expenses.

Across these three school districts; educational philosophy, curricula, staffing levels, staff compensation and benefits plans and other aspects of each school's operations are overseen by three separate school boards that are not always aligned on their philosophies and their decisions. This configuration slows adaptation to evolving academic best practices and results in some disruption to students' educational experience and preparedness as they move from school district to school district.

***Are enrollment projections considered when developing annual budgets for SAU 39's three districts: Amherst (pre K - 8), Mont Vernon (K - 6) and Souhegan (9 - 12)?***

Yes. The annual budget process includes the Superintendent's Office refreshing it's multi-year enrollment projections for all three school districts (Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan). These projections inform all aspects of the annual planning and budgeting processes for SAU 39's central operations budget and the budgets for each of the three school districts (e.g. curriculum requirements, staffing levels/mix, support services, facility requirements, contracted services, staff salaries and benefits, capital requirements, etc.).

The Superintendent submits a draft annual budget to each School Board (Amherst School Board (pre K - 8), Mont Vernon School Board (K - 6) and Souhegan School Board (9-12)). Budgets are reviewed, discussed and finalized at the Board level before being shared with Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens for their consideration.

***Do members of the Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan School Boards support exploring options to consolidate school districts?***

Yes. Amherst (pre K - 8), Mont Vernon (K - 6) and Souhegan (9 - 12) School Boards and the SAU 39 Superintendent are committed to exploring options to consolidate the three school districts.

- In October 2015 the School Boards approved a multiyear SAU 39 Strategic Plan whose goals include "Consolidating processes and resources across the SAU 39 to become a more efficient and effective school system ". One of the 2015 initiatives approved by the School Boards is "to investigate options for school district configuration in order to achieve operational efficiency".
- Prior to launching the investigation of school district configuration options, the Boards sought Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens' approval to investigate options by including warrant articles on the March 2016 Amherst and Mont Vernon ballots. **The March 2016 warrant articles, to create a cooperative school district planning committee, passed by majority in Amherst (77%) and in Mont Vernon (75%). Subsequently, the SAU 39 Superintendent formed a Streamline Committee.**
- Membership on the Streamline Committee includes representatives from each School Board (Amherst, Mont Vernon, Souhegan), SAU 39 leaders and members of the Amherst and Mont Vernon communities.
- The Streamline Committee routinely meets with the Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan School Boards to discuss its work, to seek guidance and to make recommendations.

**Why are Amherst and Mont Vernon considering school district consolidation? What are the issues that consolidation will address?**

The SAU 39 Superintendent and the School Boards (Amherst (Pre K - 8), Mont Vernon (K - 6) and Souhegan (9 - 12)) foresee increasing educational and financial challenges and risks associated with multiple school districts and school enrollment that continue to decline. In 2015 the School Boards invited Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens to participate in developing a multi-year Strategic Plan for SAU 39. The School Boards recognize that streamlining governance and school operations is fundamental to delivering quality education. The School Boards are pleased that Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens are collaborators in identifying school district consolidation options. Citizens can access the Strategic Plan @ [www.sau39.org](http://www.sau39.org).

**STRATEGIC PILLARS AND GOALS**

				
<p><b>ADVANCE</b></p>	<p><b>CONNECT</b></p>	<p><b>INVEST</b></p>	<p><b>STREAMLINE</b></p>	<p><b>UNITE</b></p>
<p><b>Goal</b> Prepare our students to compete and thrive in a continuously changing, technologically connected global marketplace.</p>	<p><b>Goal</b> Create learning opportunities that extend beyond the walls of our schools.</p> <p><b>Goal</b> Engage our citizenry, civic organizations, local businesses and alumni in supporting and promoting our educational system.</p>	<p><b>Goal</b> Attract, develop and retain quality educators and staff who share our commitment to excellence in teaching.</p> <p><b>Goal</b> Modernize our facilities and infrastructure to support the academic, athletic, arts and wellness needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner; and align with our Strategic Plan.</p>	<p><b>Goal</b> Consolidate processes and resources across the districts and SAU to become a more efficient and effective school system.</p>	<p><b>Goal</b> Adopt a SAU-wide, unified philosophy that allows all students to reach their full potential.</p>

**What work was completed by the Streamline Committee in the past year? What are the Streamline Committee's recommendations and**

## **why?**

The Streamline Committee reviewed the current configuration and budgets of the three school districts and the SAU 39 Administrative offices that oversee and support the three districts. The review included operations, information systems and organizational structure. The committee identified and evaluated alternatives for school district consolidation, guided by the SAU 39 Strategic Plan goal of *“strengthening academic quality, improving the efficient use of dollars and contributing to the flexible allocation of people and resources across an ever-changing educational landscape”*. The Streamline Committee’s recommended consolidation option emerged after analyzing four options to improve efficiency and effectiveness and after assessing how readily each option can be implemented.

### ***What school district configuration option is the Streamline Committee recommending?***

In May 2016 the Streamline Committee presented its recommendations to each of the four School Boards (SAU 39, Amherst (pre K - 8), Mont Vernon (K - 6) and Souhegan (9 - 12)). The recommended option integrates current Amherst and Mont Vernon school districts into the existing Souhegan Cooperative School District, thereby creating a single school district for the Amherst and Mont Vernon communities.

Additionally, and of equal importance, the Streamline Committee’s recommendation supports the SAU 39 Strategic Plan goals of the Advance Pillar (*Prepare our student to compete and thrive in a continuously changing, technologically connected global marketplace*) and the Unite Pillar (*Adopt a SAU-wide, unified educational philosophy that allows all students to reach their full potential, which includes developing and implementing curricula*).

### ***What school district consolidation options were considered and set aside?***

The Streamline Committee analyzed three other consolidation options.

1. No change: Continue with three school districts (Mont Vernon K - 8, Amherst School District Pre K - 8, and Souhegan High School (9 - 12) under SAU 39.
2. Combine the Amherst School District (Pre K - 8) and Mont Vernon District (K - 8) to create a single district (pre K - 8), keeping the Souhegan district separate (two districts under SAU 39).
3. Consolidate the Amherst School District (Pre K - 8) and the Souhegan School District (9 - 12) and enable Mont Vernon residents to tuition in their students.

The Committee determined that options #2 and #3 perpetuate limitations in the districts’ ability to effectively manage costs, do not address the absence of a unified educational philosophy, do not integrate curricula, and do not address inequities in teacher and staff compensation and benefits across school districts.

***What are the pros and cons of the Streamline Committee’s proposal to consolidate to a single district? Who benefits and why?***

The Streamline Committee recommends consolidation into a single district for six reasons:

Educational Benefits

1. A single district offers the opportunity to more efficiently and effectively manage the educational process and resources, providing for a more cohesive and consistent education experience for all the students.
2. Consolidation to a single district is expected to enhance the educational experience for all students as a result of having an integrated philosophy and curriculum from Pre K-12.

Financial Benefits

3. Moving to a single district significantly reduces the costs of administering the schools. This impact will be immediate and the impact will flow into future years.
4. Consolidation is expected to produce modest immediate savings, mostly from the reduction in SAU 39 administrative resources.
5. Future savings are expected as staffing, compensation and benefits assumptions are refined when the single district becomes operational.
6. Future savings are expected as we improve resource sharing across the schools and increase our ability to adapt to a shrinking school population.

If the School Boards decide to place this consolidation model on warrant articles, and the majority of Amherst citizens and the majority of Mont Vernon citizens vote to adopt this consolidation model; it will likely require one - two years of planning and implementation, including devising a unified salary and benefits plan for all employees. It is possible that not all employees in the three current districts will have the same compensation and benefits plan that they have today.

***How can Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens learn more about the recommendation to consolidate to a single school district? Ask questions? Share opinions?***

The Superintendent of Schools and the Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan School Boards are creating multiple opportunities for Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens to learn more about the recommendation to consolidate to a single school district, to ask questions and to share points of view.

***Public Forums: Please consider attending one of three Public Forums sponsored by the Superintendent and the Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan School Board members***

November 9, 2016, 7 - 9 p.m., Souhegan High School Auditorium

November 10, 2016, 7 - 9 p.m., Mont Vernon Village School

December 14, 2016, 7 - 9 p.m., Souhegan High School Auditorium

## **Online Questions and Answers**

Visit [www.sau39](http://www.sau39), the home page for schools in Amherst and Mont Vernon. On the left side of the home page, you will find a quick link to **Streamline Committee** where you can access Questions and Answers.

### ***What is the decision making process to determine whether or not to move forward with the Streamline Committee's recommendation to consolidate to a single district?***

The Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan School Boards are seeking Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens' input during November and December 2016. If citizens support placing the consolidation recommendation before Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens for a vote in March 2017, the School Board will create the necessary warrant articles. The Board will also create opportunities for additional input/questions during public hearings in January 2017 and deliberative sessions in February 2017.

### ***If consolidation to a single district is placed on the March 2017 ballot and is approved by the majority of Amherst and the majority of Mont Vernon voters in March 2017, when will this change be effective? How will we transition to this new governance model?***

If both warrant articles placed on the March 2017 ballots are approved, there will be a one-year planning window; and the consolidation will be effective July 2018 (the start of the 2018 fiscal year) and will be reflected in school operations in September 2018.

### ***Are there cost savings associated with consolidating to a single district – now and in the future?***

Areas of significant savings will be SAU 39 management and operations support for a single district compared to today's SAU and three school districts (four legal entities). Current SAU 39 services include financial management and budgeting for four legal entities, supporting the SAU 39 Board and three district School Boards and servicing and supporting technology and information systems across four legal entities. With consolidation, the organizational and infrastructure requirements can be simplified, reducing staffing, operating and contractual expenses.

Salary and benefits represent the largest expense in our budgets. Today, there are different salary and benefit packages across four legal entities. With consolidation to a single district, the new Board and district leadership will need to develop and/or negotiate new salary and benefits. Estimated salary and benefits expenses have not been developed at this time.

### ***How will the quality of my child's academic experience be enhanced by this consolidation? What might be jeopardized?***

Consolidation into a single district will accelerate collaboration, implementation and evaluation of curriculum across the new district,

strengthening the academic experience of students.

***Will consolidation to a single district increase opportunities for collaboration among teachers and other staff and improve students' educational experience?***

Yes. Today, it is not always possible to share subject matter experts and teachers across legal entities. Today, moving from any one of our three districts to another requires that the teacher or other staff resign from his/her position, losing seniority and other accrued benefits that he/she has accrued. Teachers and support staff will have greater flexibility to move to different assignments across all schools, because all staff will be employed by the same legal entity. For example, an aide working with a student could continue to work with the student through elementary, middle and high school. A subject matter expert teaching advanced mathematics could teach at the middle school and high school. Students will also have flexibility across schools. For example, a middle school student who is ready for high school chemistry could take the course at the high school while still enrolled at the middle school.

***Will students be shifted to schools other than the ones they would normally attend?***

We do not foresee that consolidation to a single district, by itself, changes where students attend school. However, consolidation to a single district will eliminate some artificial constraints. For example, if an elementary school student lives in Amherst and is closer to the Mont Vernon Village School than Clark/Wilkins, it could be possible for the Amherst student to attend the Mont Vernon Village School.

***If we consolidate to a single district, will any schools close?***

Closing of a school has not been discussed. The single district consolidation model we are discussing does not require closing a school.

***Given projected enrollments, do we envision any schools closing in the near term?***

No. Longer-term decisions would depend on future enrollment patterns across all schools.

***How much will it cost to plan for and implement consolidation to a single district?***

Cost estimates related to consolidation are not available at this time but are being developed.

***Have other towns consolidated school districts? What are the results?***

Wilton-Lyndeborough Cooperative is a very good example of a consolidation of neighboring communities. SAU 63 formerly consisted of the



Wilton School District (K-6), the Lyndeborough School District (K-6), and the Wilton-Lyndeborough Co-operative School District (7-12). Based on information from the Business Administrator at the time of the consolidation, educational benefits accrued by creating a consistent curriculum throughout the District. Ease of operations and salary and benefit savings were not immediate, but followed, as the District became a single operation. Much needed facility improvements were possible with consolidation.

***Are there other strategic decisions that need to be made before we determine our future organizational structure? If we decide to consolidate to a single district, will it limit our option in other critical areas?***

The Streamline Committee, whose members include school administrators, Board members from all three districts, Amherst citizens and Mont Vernon citizens, agree that consolidation to a single district not only supports but also facilitates other importance work such as operating within a unified educational philosophy. At present, Amherst, Mont Vernon and Souhegan do not operate under a unified educational philosophy.

***How will the new district's School Board be configured; and how will Mont Vernon and Amherst be represented?***

The decision on the single district's School Board configuration will follow both Amherst and Mont Vernon citizens voting to consolidate into a single district. Board configuration will be specified when the current School Boards revise the Articles of Incorporation. For example, Board configuration could be similar to the proportionate model currently used in the Souhegan District: 5 Amherst members and 2 Mont Vernon members. There could also be some members at large. A review of governance models in other consolidated districts show multiple models for shared governance; for example, a Board of Directors with Subcommittees/Advisory Boards that focus on grade spans, curriculum, etc. These governance decisions follow the vote by Amherst citizens and by Mont Vernon citizens to consolidate to a single unified district.

***Will the teachers and staff in the present districts be fired and have to reapply to work at the Souhegan district?***

The consolidated district will need to define staffing requirements and salary and benefits plans for the unified district. School personnel from the Amherst and Mont Vernon districts would, as appropriate, become employees of the single unified district.

***Will the new consolidated district continue to provide centralized administration and operations support? Will it be at the Brick School or another location?***

The newly consolidated district will continue to provide centralized administrative and operations services to support all schools. We anticipate some reduction in staff and non-staff expenses associated with moving from four districts to a single district. The new district administration and operations could be relocated; but this has not been assessed. We anticipate district administration and operations

services will remain at the Brick School in the short term.

***If one of our schools eventually closes due to enrollment decreases, will the building automatically revert to the town where it resides?***

The handling of capital assets is a topic to be addressed by each district. Decisions made at the district-level will be reflected in the new district's Articles of Incorporation.

***If Amherst and Mont Vernon moves forward with consolidation to a single district, will state-based funding of our schools be impacted?***

*The Superintendent's Office affirmed that that the state's current funding formula is based on # students enrolled, irrespective of governance structure. Other questions we have submitted to the state include availability of capital dollars for new construction or structural improvements when a newly consolidated district is formed.*

***What if one town approves consolidation to a single district and one rejects it?***

Consolidation to a single district will only go forward if the majority of voters in both Amherst and Mont Vernon approve the consolidation.