

September 26, 2023

Dear Faculty and Staff,

Thank you for your questions regarding the opportunity before us with the passage of HB 349. If you have any follow-ups after reading this, may I suggest that we meet in person to talk. The Bridgewater Town Office can be made available to meet and discuss things further.

Jennifer Larochelle
Educational Planning Committee

What is the “why” behind this decision?

This answer requires a bit of history. The Bridgewater-Hebron Village District (B-HVD) is a separate political subdivision created by statute in 1997 and is comprised of the Towns of Bridgewater and Hebron. This statute authorized both Towns to build the Bridgewater-Hebron Village School (B-HVS). By statute, three elected Commissioners from Bridgewater and Hebron oversee the school facility and grounds and manage the maintenance budget.

The Village District then constructed and continues to own, debt-free, the Bridgewater-Hebron Village School building, surrounding athletic fields, and furnishings. It leases the school to the Newfound Area School District (NASD or SAU4) for \$1.00 per year. Teachers, staff, and curriculum management are provided by the Newfound Area School District.

The school was built to alleviate overcrowding in SAU4 at a **multimillion-dollar cost** to the taxpayers of Bridgewater and Hebron in 1999 after several District-wide failed bond issues. Since then, Bridgewater and Hebron have raised -- **in a separate school tax** -- **over \$8 million dollars in maintenance, repair, and capital improvements. This cost is borne solely by the taxpayers of Bridgewater and Hebron.** The Newfound Area School District’s facilities support is limited to custodial services only. Over the years, Bridgewater and Hebron students have been a minority among students attending the school. Children from other towns have always been welcome to attend and that hopefully will continue.

Why now? Our citizens and parents overwhelmingly desired to establish a K-8 within the Newfound Area School District **in 2013**. Then, as now, we wanted to improve student outcomes by reconfiguring B-HVS to K-8. The **2013 reconfiguration process** never moved forward, primarily based on concern about the financial impact on the Town of Groton and the potential of limited attendance. Additionally, our towns were told by SAU4 if we succeeded in forming our own K-8 they would remove Alexandria and Groton students from the B-HVS and not offer us high school tuition agreements.

But today, that situation has changed, and now, with Groton students in the mix, establishing our own school district with a K-8 school may be a viable option if our voters so choose. Moreover, today parents are becoming more engaged in educational outcomes for their children. There’s a growing trend toward alternative public education options to include Freedom Accounts, education

tax credits for scholarships, public charter schools, open enrollment, school choice, home schooling and, **in our local case, a trend toward the public K-8 model.**

Currently SAU4 is considering reconfiguring elementary school education in the Newfound Area District. School building consolidation is being actively discussed and B-HVS will not be exempt from those discussions. It's possible B-HVS could be closed by SAU4 in the coming years.

Given this climate, we now have a unique opportunity to explore options and find creative solutions to long-standing challenges.

How will this make our school stronger and better for our students, their families, and our staff?

Our vision has always been to improve education outcomes for our children with an innovative alternative to a traditional Middle School. **Our goal** is to reconfigure B-HVS to a K-8. Numerous studies have shown that the fewer number of transitions children make before High School the greater the improved student performance. In fact, **all seven towns** in Plymouth's SAU48 use the K-8 elementary school model. Even Ashland has formed their own single-town school district; it operates a K-8 Elementary School attached to Inter-Lakes SAU2 and sends its high school students to Plymouth.

Hill, NH also formed a separate School District after withdrawing from the Franklin School District. They operate their own elementary school and tuition into the Newfound Area School District for grades 7-12. Hill is a model for such a reconfiguration.

Thanks to our teachers and parents, the B-HVS education performance is outstanding and ranked among the top K-5 schools in the state. It is consistently performing in the top 20th percentile in the State for Math and English. Reconfiguring to a K-8 allows us to continue our proven high academic standards with a coherent curriculum, effective instruction, strong leadership, results-based accountability, and sound discipline through the 8th grade.

This educational approach has proven to pay-off in the primary grades. Establishing a K-8 school will allow **more effective local control** and extend that academic pay-off for an additional three years through 8th grade. Moreover, this approach will allow us to **better manage educational costs**, provide more **local control over curriculum** (to avoid the implementation of new ELA curriculum against teachers wishes), and most importantly, give parents an **innovative alternative to traditional Middle Schools**.

What does the plan look like as a big picture? Are we still connected to SAU4 even though we will be our own SAU or are we a separate district that is still part of SAU4? Do we share bussing for students? Do we share the same teacher contract, or will we negotiate a new separate contract? Benefits? Health insurance?

No, we will not be connected to SAU4. The new law allows us to form our own three-town school district with *"its own school administrative unit with a number assigned by the department of*

education and may provide for superintendent services in accord with those options available to single school districts, including contracting for such services.”

Bussing and cafeteria services will be negotiated with the respective vendors, and this is already in process. We are open to the possibility of contracting with SAU4 or another SAU for Superintendent and Business Office services, and if that were to occur, it would be in the form of a contract for services.

Most importantly, the new law mandates we offer employment opportunities to the **“existing public-school staff and faculty in the same manner as the pre-existing district.”** Should faculty be in the middle of a multi-year contract, our new district is **obligated by other laws** to honor that contract including all benefits and health insurance. Moreover, our new school district will remain bound by the terms of the existing Collective Bargaining Agreement for teachers employed by our new school district (Appeal of SAU16 Cooperative School Board, 143 NH 97(1998)).

Will we keep our curriculum materials and technology resources?

Yes. We would like to keep the current curriculum through our first year to aid with transition and then you, the teachers, and experts, will have to opportunity to decide if you want to follow a different path.

Where will our students attend HS?

The new law further mandates *“the Bridgewater-Hebron-Groton Special Purpose School District shall work closely with the Newfound Area School District to offer parents school choice and to accommodate students already enrolled in the new district’s school.”* This has ALWAYS been our intention and why this was written into the law.

We would seek to stay closely aligned with SAU4 and work cooperatively with the Newfound Area School District to support quality education for our children. We would support space-based reciprocal enrollment for grades K through 8 and consider tuition agreements for high schoolers to attend Newfound Regional High School. Some Groton parents have expressed a desire to send their children to Plymouth High School for obvious proximity reasons. Both High Schools have considerable vacancies and should welcome the additional revenue. Current laws governing tuition agreements (including cost-per-pupil) for school districts without a high school (like ours) would apply. Also, by inviting students from other towns to attend B-HVS, we would be offering parents a choice between a traditional Middle School and a K-8 program. *As has always been the case in New Hampshire, the new district would support allowing students enrolled in the Middle and High School as of June 20, 2025, who wish to do so, to finish their courses and graduate from those schools. Moreover, doing such would lessen the financial impact of withdrawal on the Newfound Area School District.*

Will B-HVS be K-6 or K-8 and will it be considered a middle school or a K-8 elementary school? This matters when looking at course offerings for our students.

We are currently studying whether to proceed directly to a K-8 or gradually add one grade at a

time over several years to reach the 8th grade. But the model would be a **K-8 Elementary School** like SAU48. All seven towns in SAU48 – Campton, Ellsworth, Rumney, Waterville Valley, Holderness, Plymouth, and Thornton – use the **K-8 Elementary School Model**. Even Ashland uses the **K-8 Elementary School** model. And Ashland has formed their own single-town school district, operates a **K-8 Elementary School** attached to Inter-Lakes SAU2 and sends their high school students to Plymouth.

What about MS sports?

We recognize sports and extracurricular activities are critical components of modern education. Our intent is to provide these same opportunities via tuition agreements with another district. If we secure tuition agreements with the Newfound Area School District then sports will remain through the TTCC and Newfound Middle School.

Can you address Special Education costs?

Our Town appointed steering group budget sub-committee is working on a detailed capital budget to include special education costs. Rest assured; special education costs will be a key consideration in the forming of a draft budget. Please let us know if there are any specific areas that this budget sub-committee can address.

What is the startup cost? How much will it cost annually? Has anyone explored or will there be a committee to find this information?

Yes. As noted above, we have formed a budget subcommittee with members **deeply experienced** in creating capital school budgets. Two are current members of the NASD Budget Committee.

Constructing an addition to B-HVS for K-8 classrooms (if needed); hiring new teachers and support staff; and entering into tuition agreements for sports, extracurricular activities and high school **may** come with attendant start-up costs. Fortunately, the school was originally constructed with sufficient plumbing and HVAC to accommodate future expansion if required with less cost.

The current student count of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton accounts for about 15% of the student body at NASD and the corresponding budget contribution to NASD is roughly 16%. We estimate that the reduction in middle school expenses coupled with SAU4 gains in tuition and administrative revenue, if they so choose, would result in little to no fiscal impact to SAU4.

Likewise, our budget committee knows how much it costs to run our K-5 B-HVS on an annual basis. These numbers are available from the NASD capital budget. Our initial calculations to run a K-8 Elementary School – hiring additional teachers for 6-8th grade, curriculum, etc. – approximate what our three towns **currently take in each year in local and state education taxes**. Federal and state money that accrues each year to school districts will be figured in as those numbers are available.

Our plan is to present capital budget numbers to our citizens prior to the March withdrawal vote so they can make an informed decision.

How does this impact the property taxes in Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton?

We calculate the property tax impact on our towns will be minimal (see above budget discussion). Establishing our own school district not only gives us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve education outcomes for our children but it also allows for **a smaller tight-knit district giving voters greater local control over education costs and our citizens tax burden**. Not to mention shorter bus rides for our students.

Rest assured, based on our experience on last year's district-wide school funding formula committee, it's better our three towns have more local **control** over that tax burden rather than 4 other towns who hold veto power over us with their larger voting base. We currently pay about \$20,000 per student to attend schools in the NASD. **This is fair and meets our obligation to provide for the public education of our children.**

But every proposal made in the funding formula committee would have required our towns to **dramatically increase property taxes** to pay for other Towns children to attend school. One proposal made by Bristol would have required we **double our current tax rates** and pay between **\$45,000 and \$59,000** per student for the same education services the other Towns receive at around \$15,000 per student. This is simply not fair to many of our less fortunate and lower income citizens..

Thankfully, the funding committee could not agree on a fair formula, **so the current formula remains in place, for now**. By law, every five years Towns can propose petition warrant articles to change the funding formula. All seven Towns vote. So, if we don't form our own school district now, then we **risk dramatic and unreasonable tax increases every five years**.

We are employees of SAU4. Will we all fall subject to a RIF and then have to reapply or be transferred to another building?

We three communities are proud of our faculty and staff. You have created one of the top K-5 schools in the state. It is not our wish for any of you to move on. As mentioned above, we are obligated by law to honor teacher's existing contracts. You will simply be offered a new contract under the new SAU number. Our withdrawal has never been about eliminating teachers. It's always been about improving, with your expertise, educational outcomes for our children.

Will you be able to honor the longevity bonus that senior staff members have earned?

Yes of course. See above.

Did Groton contribute to this district financially? If not, why are they going to have voting rights on this issue?

If your question refers to the Bridgewater Hebron **Village District** then no, Groton is not obligated to contribute to the maintenance, repair, and capital improvements to the B-HVS. As noted above,

the Bridgewater-Hebron Village District was established by law in 1997. So only Bridgewater and Hebron levy an additional education tax on our citizens above and beyond the local and state education taxes to pay for maintenance, repairs, and capital improvements to the Village School. **We've been doing this for 23 years relieving the remaining five towns in the Newfound District of this financial burden. It's been a significant contribution we've made to the larger District.**

If by voting rights you mean voting to withdraw from the Newfound School District at our 2024 annual town meetings, then yes. The new law requires Groton to vote on a withdrawal warrant article. If all three towns vote to withdraw then the NH Board of Education issues a certificate of withdrawal. The next step is the election of a new three-town school board and budget committee and a special election to vote on "articles of agreement" between the three towns to include an agreed upon funding formula.

Like any town in a cooperative school district, Groton will be paying for the education of their children by collecting their local and state (SWEPT) education taxes on an Average Daily Membership formula as they did for SAU4.

Why isn't Alexandria included?

The new School District/SAU will include the three towns that currently have 100% of their elementary students attending B-HVS. The new law also considered the over 200 square mile expanse of the NASD -- one of the largest geographical school districts in the state. Our three towns lying at the northern end of the district are contiguous. This means shorter bus rides for our students. We also fully appreciate Alexandria doesn't have their own elementary school. At the end of the 2022 school year, Alexandria had 53 students enrolled at Bristol Elementary School and 32 enrolled at B-HVS. So, our objective has ALWAYS been to account for all involved. As noted above, as part of the proposed tuition agreements with SAU4, our new SAU will wholeheartedly welcome the retention of Alexandria and Bristol students at B-HVS.

Will Allied Arts, Foreign language, Extracurricular activities be offered?

Yes. As noted above we would like to keep the current curriculum through our first year to aid with transition and then you, the teachers, and experts, will have to opportunity to decide if you want to follow a different path. We will negotiate with the Newfound District for retention of these curriculum materials. Extracurricular activities will be provided for through tuition agreements. Our education subcommittee recognizes that a K-8 Elementary School is a different education model than a Middle School. This is why it's exciting to try something new and innovative for our students. And as also noted above, all seven towns in SAU48 have had considerable success with the K-8 Elementary School approach.

How will Art, PE, Music, and ICT positions be filled for employees looking to continue their full-time employment and yet, potentially, work for two districts with different contracts/different employers?

This is a great question. As noted above, the new law mandates we offer employment opportunities to the *“existing public-school staff and faculty in the same manner as the pre-existing district.”* We want the best for our students and will work out logistics to provide Art, PE, and ICT. Should individuals who currently provide those services want to continue this is a logistical item that can be negotiated.

What is the motivation for creating a new SAU when the expressed interest by several on the committee is to keep so much the same?

Please see the answers to the first three questions above.

How will the Village District change with the addition of Groton?

It won't change. The Village District is a separate political sub-entity created by statute in 1997. This statute authorized the Bridgewater-Hebron Village District (not the two towns) to construct and own the Bridgewater-Hebron Village School building, surrounding athletic fields, and furnishings. It leases the school to the Newfound Area School District (NASD or SAU4) for \$1.00 per year. Teachers, staff, and curriculum management are provided by the Newfound Area School District. In a similar fashion, the Village District will lease the building for \$1.00 per year to the newly formed school district. Teachers, staff and curriculum management will be provided by the new school district. The Village District's sole function is the facility, and it has no involvement in the educational policies and operation of the school.

What aspects of the current SAU agreement/NASD are at odds with the people in favor of creating a new SAU?

Please see answers to the first two questions above. To summarize: a smaller tight-knit school district allows greater voter local control over education costs and our citizens tax burden. It also provides more intimate input over curriculum and administrative policy, and shorter bus rides for our students. Sometimes smaller is better.

How does one get elected to be a representative for the village district? Is it a lifetime appointment? How do you select your candidates?

The Village District is a separate political sub-division created by the 1997 statute. Think of it as a small but separate town with its own budget and policies. The statute provides for self-governing through the Village District Commission. Three Commissioners are elected on a three-year rotating schedule. The Village District Treasurer is also an elected position. There is no such thing as lifetime appointments. Any citizen -- but only from Bridgewater and Hebron -- can stand for election for Village District positions. Elections are held every April. All Commission meeting dates are posted in accordance with the law and meeting minutes are posted on the Village District website or available at the Bridgewater town building.

The HB 349 process does not have a feel of transparency, rumors have been rampant, talk of private meetings, lack of information, can information be put in writing and reported out on town websites or via the SAU?

This perception is unfortunate. We have been diligent in keeping the public informed. There have been no secret meetings. In December of 2022 we informed the then-superintendent that our three-town Selectboards and Village District Commission (legitimate legislative bodies) would seek relief through the state legislature to form our own school district for all the reasons cited above.

Our selectman kept the public informed with public meetings and updates to the 570 Hebron and 750 Bridgewater citizens who subscribe to the Towns email newsletter system. Groton similarly kept their citizens informed. We continue to act in the open fashion.

Moreover, **two public hearings** were held in both the House and Senate where citizens from all seven towns had the opportunity to make their views known. And many did, including SAU4 school board members and the then-superintendent. Tellingly, over **80 citizens** from Bridgewater, Hebron and Groton attended the hearings in Concord to voice support for the bill. And **330** of our citizens signed in online in support of the bill. Many submitting written supportive testimony.

This bill received widespread bi-partisan support in the legislature. It passed unanimously in both the House and Senate. All three state senators representing the seven-town Newfound Area School District voted in favor and voiced strong support in committee hearings. Such widespread legislative support confirms this excellent concept and a once-in-a-generation opportunity to improve education outcomes for our children.

Additionally, we submitted fact sheets, point papers, frequently asked questions, and legal analyses to SAU4 and school board members to help them understand the desires of an overwhelming majority of our citizens. We've tried, with varying degrees of success, to bring School Board members and SAU4 into this process. These documents have been posted on our three-town websites for over a year. We regularly add new information to [our steering committee website](#). Our steering group representatives have been to the Village School on two recent occasions to answer questions and leave behind the documents described above.

As always, if you have further questions, please let us know. We remain open to and encourage meetings as well.