

January 2024

## **Updated Info about HB349 for Parents/Grandparents & Concerned Citizens**

Most town citizens know that Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton have joined together, proposing to form a new school district and leave the Newfound Area School District (SAU4). While all our citizens want to understand why this is happening, our Select Boards and Steering Committee completely understand that the parents of the children in the school system have an extra level of concern.

In our town and Steering Committee meetings, we have taken note of the questions that the parents have had, and what follows below is an attempt to address those questions and the concerns underlying them:

### **Q&A**

**“It seems most of the motivation (and the information supplied to voters) to leave is financial. What about the children and staff?”**

The Select Boards of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton believe an essential part of their service to the community is to carefully review all finances as part of their role in serving the community. So yes, an initial concern was exploring the financial implications of leaving the district and the impact on taxes. However, as we continued to research different educational models that address student performance and the concept of a community school, it became apparent that our focus included the educational welfare of the children as our primary concern. The Select Boards solicited expert opinions of educational leaders throughout our state to explore the value of a Pre-K through 8th-grade community school. Our research pointed to the value of a community school that represents the interests of parents in a quality education coupled with community involvement addressing the needs of children in a changing society where children need more social-emotional support than ever before in public education. The entire function of the Steering Committee that the towns’ Select Boards appointed is to ensure that the new potential Pre-K through 8th grade school provides high-quality educational opportunities and choices to all students at a reasonable cost with minimal disruption to students and staff.

**“What caused this move?”**

Once the financial concern became evident, we looked more deeply into our SAU4 relationship. Several other issues came to light, and we have outlined each of those below.

- **Financial** – The structure of the SAU4 charter left us vulnerable to tax increases imposed on us by other towns. Essentially, larger towns could force us to pay more per student than others for the same services. We could not change the charter as it currently exists to ensure the quality of education as we are a minority of voters in SAU4.
- **No Voice in the Bridgewater-Hebron Village School Programming** – The charter allows the SAU4 School Board to determine what grades attend the school or even if the Bridgewater-Hebron Village School (B-HVS) would stay open. Our towns have little say in educational services and innovating the school programming to meet the needs of the children. The SAU4 was considering

a plan to centralize elementary education with the possibility of closing several local schools. Based on our extensive research, we believe that the best educational setting for children is a local school that reflects quality education and community input to ensure the needs of children are being met. A movement toward the changing needs of children in our state and society. A greater focus on high school choice.

- **Expanded educational options** – Faced with potential tax increases, we researched the quality of education our children were receiving and carefully studied schools that valued childhood, a sense of connection, and a future for all students. We realized there were options for improvement that couldn't be explored while we were part of SAU4, specifically, enrolling our children at Plymouth High School as an alternative and expanding B-HVS to a PreK-8. We can offer more choices and opportunities in career and technical programs within a reasonable geographical location.
- **Is "Big" Better?** – SAU4 comprises seven towns; with a large district, getting and keeping buildings maintained or built is difficult. Attempting to achieve consensus on curriculum and management issues is challenging. Each town's voice is diluted. A smaller district means each town has more input, and parents' concerns are addressed more readily. You get a more significant say in how and what your child is taught. The school becomes part of each community, helping to support appropriate in and out-of-school activities year-round.

**In the end, the reasons for leaving outweigh the benefits of staying.**

**HB349 allows three towns to vote irrespective of the concerns and votes of the other four towns, making decisions more transparent.**

HB349 received significant public support from over 400 citizens in three towns and town officials. Usually, no town can withdraw from a cooperative school district without a vote of the entire district (RSA195). HB349 provided new legislation that allowed us to leave without the approval of the other towns and overwhelmingly passed the NH House and Senate. If financial obligations are satisfied (and in our case, they are), what could be the reason for forcing any town to stay in a district they don't want to be in? HB349 fixed this problem for us. The voters of the three towns will decide at their annual town meetings.

**"This is being forced on parents, and we have no options."**

This is a misperception—we are increasing your options as a parent and trying to expand your choices.

1. SAU4 has agreed to, in principle, a "tailing out" agreement that allows children currently attending the middle and high schools to continue and graduate. We are working on an ongoing tuition agreement with SAU4's administration. This means your child who is not yet in high school can choose to attend Newfound Regional High School or Plymouth High School. Tuition would be paid for by the new school district and not the parents.
2. A final benefit is an "Opt-in" agreement with SAU4. This would mean you could enroll your child in the SAU4 system.

3. A parent with a high school child who resides in the new school district of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton in 2025 can choose to attend Plymouth High School instead of Newfound High School.
4. There is no additional cost to the parents for either option. We have agreements in principle for both Newfound and Plymouth. The overriding goal is no disruption for children. Suppose a child wants to continue in SAU4 through 2030 (or potentially beyond). In 2026 through 2028, a grade will be added in B-HVS each year to reach a grade configuration of PreK-8.

**“Will expanding to PreK-8 change the “culture” of B-HVS and focus on the educational needs of the children with an emphasis on community schooling?”**

Yes, we believe it will improve educational programming for all students. Campton, Rumney, Holderness, Ashland, Waterville Valley, Lyme, Plymouth, and many other K-8s are very successful. National studies support this as a more developmentally appropriate educational model helping to focus on the needs of the young adolescent. In many K-8 environments, the older students mentor the younger ones. They become additional assets and role models, and they gain leadership experience.

**“Will the teachers have access to other resources such as curriculum and special education coordinators?”**

Yes! It may be structured differently than SAU4 (consultants will work closely with staff to identify the children's and school's needs). Staff will have an opportunity to identify field experts in areas of literacy (reading and writing) and numeracy (math), as well as other educational areas.

**“What about sports, clubs, after-school support, and the like?”**

K-8s throughout the state effectively provide these opportunities, and this question was front and center when studying the possibilities. We are exploring two options: 1) join a “cooperative league” of other K-8s or 2) tuition (district not parent paid) for these activities to a larger middle school. We are seeking funding for more inclusive and developmentally appropriate playgrounds as well as other opportunities.

**“My child is not from the withdrawing towns. What about them?”**

We desire reciprocity with SAU4, but that is not our decision; the SAU4 School Board will determine this. Should the SAU4 decide on a reciprocal agreement, students would be enrolled and continue their education at B-HVS. We believe those students should be able to continue and complete their education at B-HVS.

**“What about the preschool program?”**

We have made overtures to SAU4 to leave the preschool program intact at B-HVS. There is ample room for the program, and SAU4 has limited space options. There could be significant savings for the Newfound Area School District if we continue to “host” the program. We are open to working on an agreement to benefit both school districts.

**“Will the lease agreement between Bridgewater-Hebron Village District (B-HVD) and SAU4 continue in some form?”**

The current lease expires in June of 2024. We have given SAU4 notice of non-renewal. We are open to an altered arrangement (preschool as an example). B-HVD has considered the possibility of expanding the building by two to four additional classrooms in the future to accommodate any potential needs.

**“At this point, what documents are agreed on in principle, and what does that mean?”**

At this point, legal documents and proposals have been shared by legal counsel for SAU48 (Plymouth) and SAU4 (Newfound). No final agreements can be signed until Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton vote to form the new school district. An understanding, in principle, is expected during interim phases where a contracting entity has not yet been formed. Once the new school district is approved, it can enter into contractual agreements.

**“What if the withdrawal fails to pass?”**

As stated earlier in this document, taxes would likely increase significantly and B-HVS can be closed anytime. We would lose the opportunity to control our own children’s educational choices. Each town will continue to have only one out of seven “voices” on the SAU4 School Board. Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton would still have the minority of voters within the seven-town Newfound Area School District.

We believe this is an incredible opportunity to innovate our educational programming and stay steadfast in protecting our taxes.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

The Bridgewater, Hebron & Groton Steering Committee