Phase II - Introduction

Congratulations! If you are reading this section it means that your new or expanded regional school district agreement has been approved by the voters and the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education and you are now moving into the transition phase, or what we call Phase II. The transition period begins from the time the voters approve the Regional Agreement and the Commissioner has approved the new district and ends on June 30 of the year when the new district assumes full control. Typically, the transition period lasts from six to eighteen months and is a very busy time for all those involved.

Phase II of this document was created to provide a comprehensive list of all the actions that will need to be taken and decisions that need to be made before the new district can operate independently. Unlike in Phase I, the information is not presented in a chronological manner as there is no set order for when each action must be taken. The order in which items are addressed is at the discretion of the district. Once again, a Checklist has been provided to help the user keep track of what has been done and what is still to be completed. Additionally, several Appendices contain supportive information and sample documents to address transition activities.

This is an exciting time for you and your new district. We wish you all the best as you complete your transition.
# Phase II
## Becoming a New Region Checklist

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Completed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Interim School Committee Appointed according to Regional Agreement</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>First meeting of Interim School Committee called by a member town Superintendent</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Superintendent called the meeting to order to elect Chair</td>
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<td>b. New Chair conducted elections for:</td>
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<td>1. Vice Chair</td>
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<td>2. Secretary</td>
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<td>3. Recording Secretary for minutes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Interim Committee discussed hiring a Treasurer</td>
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<td>d. Interim Committee discussed hiring Legal Counsel if not already hired</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Transition Budget Constructed</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>School Committee Appointed:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Superintendent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Business Administrator</td>
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<td>c. Treasurer</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Hired:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Consultants</td>
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<td>b. Legal Counsel</td>
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<td>c. Financial Advisor</td>
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<td>d. Bond Counsel</td>
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</table>
6. Transition Timeframe Developed

7. Calendar for School Committee Meetings Developed

8. Calendar of Event
   a. Meetings with Selectmen
   b. Meetings with Finance Committee
   c. Town Meeting Dates

9. Obtained Federal ID #
   a. Opened Bank Accounts
   b. Established Deposit Account for DESE and Local Funds

10. Obtained State ID #

11. Obtained DESE ID #

12. Obtained Food Service ID #

13. Developed process for new Policy Book development

14. Established School Committee Sub-Committees
   a. Communications
   b. Negotiations
   c. Budget
   d. Policy
   e. Transportation
      • Contacted DESE to establish process to request Transportation Reimbursement

15. Technology
   a. Website set up
   b. Email System set up
c. Identified Hardware and Software for Central Office

Completed


e. Identified Hardware and Software for Instruction

Completed

f. EPIMS

Completed

g. SIMS

Completed

h. Phone System selected

Completed

16. Business Operations

a. Accounting System set up

Completed

b. Payroll System set up

Completed

c. Retirement Systems set up for:

- Teachers

Completed

- County

Completed

d. Insurance issues addressed

Completed

17. Auditor hired

Completed

18. If renovating or building a new building:

a. MSBA contacted

Completed

b. Building Committee appointed

Completed

c. Building Study completed

Completed

19. Budget Developed for the next year, including:

a. Grants

Completed

b. Operating Budget

Completed

c. Capital Budget

Completed

d. Debt __________

Completed

20. Policy Development Process established

Completed
21. Instructional Leadership and Direction identified

22. Curriculum Leadership and Direction identified

23. Professional Development Program set up

24. Staffing for New Region hired:
   a. Administration
   b. Teachers
   c. Support Personnel

25. Athletics Program set up

26. Special Education Program set up

27. Food Service Program and staffing set up

28. Custodial Services staffing set up

29. Strategic Plan developed
Phase II: Becoming a New Region

I. The First Stages of the Transition Period

The first order of business is to convene the Regional School District Committee. Your agreement may provide that the first regional school district committee be appointed from the member districts’ sitting committees until such time as elections are held or the agreement may call for an immediate election of new school committee members. Regardless of the method of selection, the members of the new regional school committee must first convene as an official body to begin the work of the new region.

The initial meeting may be called by one of the local school Superintendents and that Superintendent may run the meeting until a Chairperson is elected.

A. Powers and Duties of the Regional School Committee

The Regional School Committee, whether selected through interim appointment, or elected, has all of the powers of school committees and those additional powers as stipulated in Chapter 71, Section 16B. The Regional Agreement, however, may address how these powers, duties and responsibilities must be coordinated with those of the member district school committees during the transition phase. The language of the agreement is the contract between/among the member districts and must be honored throughout the process. In addition to areas that must be coordinated with the member district school committee, the regional agreement will address quorum and the needed votes to address specific tasks. Some of the first official responsibilities of the Regional Committee are:

1. Elect school committee officers, chairperson, vice chairperson;
2. Hire/appoint a Superintendent, Business Manager, Special Education Director and other central office staff, as appropriate;
3. Engage consultants; e.g., legal counsel, financial advisor, bond counsel, and health plan design consultant;
4. Hire a treasurer;
5. Set calendar of future school committee meetings;
6. Establish a budget for the transition period and for the first full year of operation;
7. Arrange for the election of permanent school committee members, as appropriate;
8. Meet with all staff of the member district as well as member town officials;
9. Develop transportation policy and vet with DESE;
10. Receive, manage, and expend funds’
11. Enter contracts and leases;
12. Negotiate and enter into collective bargaining agreements;
13. Appoint a Building Committee, as needed; and
14. Develop and approve a strategic plan for the district.

These are examples of important duties and powers, but it does not imply that it is an exhaustive list.

B. **Relationship between Regional School Committee and local school committees during the transition.**

The Regional Agreement will detail the relationship and interaction of the sitting Committees where powers/responsibilities may overlap. The agreement may limit the ability of the local school committees to make long term commitments or obligations that will ultimately be the responsibility of the regional district school committee. This relates to issues which will be carried forward into the new Region, and for which the Regional School Committee will have to accept responsibility. The regional school district agreement may provide that during the transition:

1. The local School Committees must receive Regional School Committee approval for decisions made about changing the district school choice status.

2. The Local School Committees receive Regional School Committee approval of any expenditure which would commit the new Region in the future.

Any issue that could have long-term financial, contractual and educational impact on the new region" should have input from the Regional Committee. The critical piece is that clear lines of communication and action are established in order to ensure a smooth transition and the future stability of the new region.

C. **Termination of the Transitional Regional Committee**

The Transition Regional Committee’s duration will be defined in the Regional Agreement. It may only exist for the initial period from the date of the vote establishing the region until the fiscal year following the next fiscal year from the vote. During this time, there may be two regional school committees – the initial appointed school committee and the newly elected school committee. Regardless of the composition, the regional school committee has all of the powers outlined in law and in the regional school district agreement.
D. Calendar for School Committee Meetings

Developing something as simple as a calendar for School Committee meetings needs to be thought through carefully. Site becomes an issue, because there are now at least two partners in the process. Making the operations of the new School Committee visible in each member community is of great importance in order to create interest and support. The frequency of meetings can be a bit tricky, because it must blend with the meetings of the local School Committees, given that initially some members may serve on both. There is also value in trying to avoid meetings of the other local boards in the member communities (e.g., Boards of Selectmen and Finance Committees). Finally, because of the number of initiatives and issues that arise in the beginning stages of the Region, there is great need for multiple meetings each month. This becomes even more important, as the budget is developed.

One alternative to avoiding some meeting conflicts of town boards is to schedule the Regional School Committee meetings (perhaps two per month) on different days of the week. This schedule, while not perfect, deals with the matters noted above.

II. Develop Transition Timeframe

It is important to first list all the tasks that have to be addressed during the transition period. The next step is to assign tasks and establish a timeline for addressing and accomplishing these tasks.

A. Calendar of Events:

1. Meeting with Staff - Meetings with staff from all job categories should be held early in the process and should include updates as the process moves forward. Staff will have numerous concerns and will be worried about individual positions and roles. The best way to deal with this is to be open and thorough in all communications with the staff regarding what possible changes the regionalization may bring.

2. The Regional School Committee will find it both necessary and advantageous to schedule meetings with local town boards. The range of common topics of interest will be wide and varied. The process of regionalization is new and can be misunderstood, so opening lines of communication is critical. For example, local boards will often need to have the Regional budget process clearly explained, particularly the concept of “assessment.” Issues around End of Year Reporting and Schedule 19 matters, building leases, insurance (all types), and MSBA matters will abound. Explanatory meetings can be the mechanism to smooth out the bumps in
the road. Many communities have developed groups (Selectmen, Fincom, School Committee, and staff) which work together on local budgets—reviewing/projecting available funds and projected costs. If these exist, it makes great sense to continue Regional involvement with them, so that budget discussions can occur in a collective way. This is of particular importance in the first few budgets!

Engaging town officials with the affairs of the Region early and often should be a goal during the transition period.

B. The Tasks: [in alphabetical order – see Appendix K for timeline]

- Administrative Organization—Develop a new organization chart.
- Athletics—Merge teams, policies, and school colors, logos, and mascots.
- Auditor—Take over auditing tasks from individual towns.
- Budget Development—Develop the first Regional budget during the Transition Phase.
  - Sub-committee of the Transitional Regional School Committee.
  - Develop a Joint Sub-Committee comprised of members of the School Committee, Boards of Selectmen, and Finance Committees.
- Building Leases or Purchases -- Draw up agreement to lease or own facilities.
- Building Usage—Finalize plans regarding building usage and purpose.
- Business Operations—Merge multiple business practices, procedures, and staff.
  - Payroll and accounting systems
  - Retirement systems (teacher and county)
  - Insurance issues
  - Identification numbers and codes (Federal, State, and DESE)
- Curriculum and Instruction—Merge curriculum and instructional practices from the various school districts.
- Food Services and Custodial Services—Merge staff and services.
- Grants—Check with DESE on grants that continue from the local district into the new region. Submit blended grants for the first year of the operational region (some eligibility parameters may change with different schools and different students).
- Insurance
• Property & Casualty
• Health
• Acceptance of 32b

• Professional Development—Develop plan for teaching staff, support staff, and administrators.

• Public Relations—Form a Regional School Committee sub-committee to communicate with members of the community, the students, and the staff.

• Revolving Funds - Monies that are held by the municipal governments, including revolving funds like School Choice, Food Service, etc., will need to be transferred to the new region. The Regional School Committee will need to vote to accept all revolving funds. The district’s finance officer will then establish an account or accounts and request that all these funds be transferred to the new region.

• School Committee Organization—Appoint Interim Regional School Committee prior to elected Regional School Committee, if called for in your regional agreement.

• School Committee Policy Development—Merge multiple School Committee policy books and develop a new one for the new Region.

• Special Education—Develop a plan to address the following issues:
  • Communication,
  • Students,
  • Staff,
  • Level of Services,
  • Technology, and
  • Location of Programs.

• Staffing—Merge the teaching staff, support staff, and administration of the individual districts into a regional staff.

• Strategic Planning—Develop at least a short-term strategic plan and make a commitment to a more comprehensive strategic plan in the near future.

• Student Activity Funds - Monies that are held by the municipal governments, including revolving funds like student activity funds, will need to be transferred to the new region. The Regional School Committee will need to vote to accept all revolving funds. The district’s finance officer will then request that all these funds be transferred to the new region.

• Sub-Committees of the Transitional and Elected Regional School Committee—Do the necessary work more efficiently.
• Communication
• Negotiations
• Regional Budget
• Town-wide Budget
• Policy
• Strategic Plan
• Web Site

• Technology—infrastructure, hardware, and software.
  • Web Site
  • E-mail System
  • Hardware and software for Central Office
  • Hardware and Software for Instruction
  • EPIMS
  • SIMS
  • Phone System

• Timeline—Develop an action plan with a timeline.

• Transportation- What changes and what stays the same? Given that there are many different configurations as districts approach regionalization (for example, expanding regions or newly-formed organizations), there may be significant changes to student transportation practice and policy. This will be particularly true for newly-formed regions, which will receive partial reimbursement for transportation costs and may have to transport students greater distances.
  • Develop a new transportation policy - In new regions it may be necessary to adopt new policy regarding student transportation given that the member communities may have different individual transportation practices and policies.
  • Review current service in light of new requirement to provide K-12 transportation to eligible students.
  • Assume responsibilities for regular day transportation in transition year if called for in your regional agreement.
  • As appropriate, begin discussions with DESE to request regional transportation reimbursement in the first operational year of the new Region. While such reimbursement has been granted, it is not guaranteed.

• Union Negotiations
  • Getting “new” unions certified and recognized by the Regional School Committee.
  • Negotiating with all “new” unions.
III. **Develop Process for New Policy Book**

One of the important duties of the School Committee is to develop, adopt and implement policies, which govern the operation of the district. It is a daunting, time-consuming task which may create the need to consider a consultant to help with the process.

To begin this process, we recommend that you consider doing the following:

A. Conduct an initial review to study existing policy manuals from member districts to find what currently is shared as policy. There may be many policies of this type.

B. Review policies that address the same topic but are written differently and yet produce a similar result.

C. Identify policies which exist in all manuals but are different in intent.

D. Include those policies which appear in one district but not the others.

IV. **Establish Sub-committees**

As with any school committee, there will be a need for subcommittees to focus on segments of the operation and to address critical issues. In some ways, this will be intensified during the transition period, because all segments of operation are being developed for the first time as a Regional District and will require some level of School Committee involvement.

A. **Communication**

If there is one single area that is critical in the transition period, it is communications. It is important to reach out to the public, staff, affiliated agencies (collaboratives, contractors, and special education private schools), DESE, MSBA and your local municipal officials early on in transition period. Regionalizing brings new ways of doing things into play, many of which are not intuitive. Nothing will be more evident of this than the budget preparation and concept of an “assessment” that will be voted on by local member communities. The community and its leaders may have great difficulty understanding that the budget process is now different. Create a subcommittee to focus on and anticipate the need to communicate—how, when, who and where is important to getting word out and creating support. The development of a website as early as possible and then using it to share updates on the regionalization process will be a critical step in establishing a commitment to open communication.
Another example of the need to communicate clearly will relate to the process to identify a name of the regional district. This needs to be determined during the Planning Board phase and ought to be a topic of discussion in all public forums leading up to the initial vote on regionalization.

There will be similar types of decisions to be made when team names, colors and mascots are determined. These issues should be included on several School Committee meeting agendas for open discussion.

B. Negotiations

Some staffing contracts may end on June 30 and will not apply on July 1 when operations for the Region begin. Some contracts, however, may continue on in the new Region. The Regional Agreement will need to address such matters. Unions will need to seek School Committee recognition for them to represent employee groups. Ultimately, it will be necessary to establish a negotiation subcommittee to conduct the actual “at the table” negotiations. While it is not absolutely necessary to have a contract in place on day one of operation, it is better to have something in place sooner rather than later.

C. Budget [See budget process in Section VI.]

Developing the first Regional budget is one of the most important activities during the transitional period. It is recommended that the Regional School Committee establish a sub-committee representing all communities and interests to work closely with the administration [Superintendent(s), Business Manager(s), and Personnel Manager(s)] to develop assumptions, drafts, and final documents. We recommend that you consult Chapter 71, Section 16B and 603 C.M.R. 41.05 and Appendices M1 and M2 for additional budget preparation information. It is recommended that during the transition period a joint board be formed of representatives of the Regional School Committee and the member Boards of Selectmen, and the Finance Committees. This should be done very early in the transition period in order to establish a working budget relationship.

This “Tri-Board” will make sure that all parties understand that the previous “budget” process has now become an “assessment” process. Hopefully, this group will establish some common assumptions and perhaps even agree on budget parameters. If this happens, the first regional school budget/assessment process will go very smoothly and get support from the various boards at the respective annual town meetings.
D. **Policy**

Often, a Policy Sub-Committee will choose to focus on one section of the policy manual at a time and review/update those policies as needed before moving on to another section of the manual. It is advised that the School Committee identify regular times in its meeting agendas to discuss and take action on policy to keep the manual as current as possible. Sometimes, school committees engage a group like MASC to support this effort.

E. **Strategic Plan** [See Appendix L for an example of a Strategic Plan written by a new regional district.]

Creating a Strategic Plan has several levels of value for the new region. First, it will give direction and set goals and initiatives for the region to utilize as decisions are made. Second because strategic planning will involve input from staff, community and parents as well as administrators, it will begin the development of core values for the district. Finally, the process will give all constituent groups a sense of ownership and commitment to the new entity. The strategic plan does not have to be of long duration, perhaps for only two to three years until a more robust process can be undertaken, but it will pull together the collective guidance from the member districts.

While many districts have undertaken this type of task and will have staff that can develop a good process, there are a number of consultants available who can assist in expediting the process for the region. The consultant can perform much of the leg work and facilitation of meetings and can then take charge of the production of the model and final version of the plan. Ayer Shirley received proposals from multiple consultant groups who were greatly interested in this type of work. Hiring the consultant gave regional administration the opportunity to participate actively in the process without having to be fully responsible for the task.

V. **Technology**

A. **Web Site:**

The new region’s website will be the “face” of the region, at least at the beginning. It is important to form a sub-committee with interested parties representing the administration/staff, the School Committee, and the community. It may be possible to build on one or both of the individual school district websites. Finding other districts’
excellent sites and studying them will help focus the task. It may be necessary to hire a consultant to assist with this task.

Web sites should have constantly updated and user-friendly information. During the transition year, the web site will be helpful keeping members of the staff and community informed and involved in the many activities being conducted. Questionnaires can help focus the tasks at hand.

While the regional website is being built and implemented, it is important to designate an administrative overseer of the site. Generally, another person will be given (perhaps for a stipend) the day-to-day task of administering the site. Protocols need to be established which assure that appropriate information is put up on the site and is monitored for timeliness.

B. E-mail System

It is possible, and maybe probable, that the newly regionalized school districts have different e-mail providers. If they do share a single provider, it is also possible/probable that the different systems have different features. Generally, the technology staff will assume responsibility for researching the similarities and differences and making recommendations to the administration. A decision will have to be made by the Superintendent or designee which e-mail system and which features to utilize. All staff will have to be assigned a new e-mail address.

C. Hardware and Software for Central Office

Again, it will be important for the technology staff to review what each separate district has, what is needed for the consolidated Central Office, and to make a recommendation for the tools that are needed.

It will be clear that there are two significant considerations for hardware. One is the infrastructure which includes servers and switches. It may be necessary to bring in an outside consultant group to review the state of the infrastructure and make recommendations for the future. It is possible that by utilizing the best hardware from both districts, little or no additional expense will be necessary in this area. Many districts will find that this is an area that has been neglected during difficult economic times, and now is the time to remedy that situation.

The other significant consideration for hardware will be in the business function as a separate server may be needed to support this department. The financial software will need to include an appropriate system for payroll, accounts payable, benefits/human
resources, EPIMS, and all necessary personnel functions. The Business Manager and staff will assume responsibility for this recommendation.

D. Hardware and Software for Instruction

One might assume that the combined hardware and software assets of the two (or more) districts might be adequate to begin the new region. It is very possible, however, that during this transitional planning period, the staff and administration will recommend additional, or different, important software and hardware.

Often there are different software packages in the different districts that are used to accomplish the same tasks. Conversely, some schools may be using an on-line version and others using a downloaded version of the same software program. All of these software packages need to be reviewed by the system’s designated curriculum person and staff to make recommendations with input from principals and department leaders.

E. EPIMS

EPIMS is a relatively new system devised by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to track educational staff and to ensure that teachers are “highly qualified.” Reporting EPIMS data to DESE can be done by someone in the Business Office or perhaps by a Data Manager. Most, if not all, financial software packages include an ability to keep track of EPIMS data and send reports to DESE.

F. SIMS

The district’s technology staff will know about Student Information Management System (SIMS). In some instances, the software package from one system will be used in the new region. That will necessitate importing the student data from the other system(s) into the one to be used. Perhaps the new Region will incorporate an entirely new SIMS package, necessitating importing all student data.

G. Phone System

Like all other technology systems, the existing phone systems need to be reviewed for serviceability, functionality, age, appropriateness, and compatibility. This too is most often done by the technology staff. Does each school have compatible and comparable equipment and service? What is needed to make this happen? New phone numbers and personnel extensions need to be established.
The other significant question is what service provider should be used. There are many things to consider such as service (quality and response time), installation expenses, general monthly expense, long-distance rates, and desired bells and whistles.

**VI. Business Operations**

A. **Payroll and Accounting Systems**

It is quite possible that member districts will have different software systems for financial operations (payroll and accounting, etc.). For example, Ayer used MUNIS and Shirley used Unifund, which made it necessary for an RFP (Request For Proposal) for the system. In any case, there will be need for training and importing of data regardless of what system is finally selected.

This process needs to be undertaken very early in the transition period, because much of the change over will begin in January prior to a July 1 start up. There may be a number of unintended consequences, as well so an early set up is important. It may take up to a full year from initial planning to actual operations.

B. **Retirement Systems—Teachers and County**

It will be fairly simple to move teachers from local districts to the region for the purposes of MTRS [Massachusetts Teachers Retirement System 617-679-6877] (teachers and many administrators). There are several reasons for this. All teachers belong to MTRS, so it is a simple change of employer, and because it is a state obligation, there is no local assessment factor.

County retirement systems will require some more discussion and thought. As an example, when Ayer and Shirley were involved in regionalization discussions with Lunenburg, retirement issues were magnified, because Ayer and Shirley were part of Middlesex and Lunenburg was part of Worcester County Retirement System. However, it is again a case where early outreach to the agency is beneficial. Staff in Ayer-Shirley was able to walk through the transition for staff movement from towns to Region without major issues. The Middlesex County Retirement System (978-439-3025) also worked hard to provide an initial assessment, which assisted in building the budget.

C. **Insurance Issues**

Some insurances issues will be relatively simple to resolve. For example, property and casualty insurance, as well as other types of insurance (Workers’ Comp, etc.) can be quoted by current local carriers, and coverage determinations will be part of that process.
Health insurance will be more complex and will most likely need the involvement of a consultant who knows the process of plan design and options regarding purchasing groups. The process will also require some input from legal counsel on a number of levels. For example, legal counsel input around working with existing union contracts and statute will be invaluable.

Legal counsel is critical, because, while acknowledging that it would be impossible to create an official "Insurance Advisory Committee" to participate in the process as the new district will not have any retired members (a required member of the Committee) for at least one year, counsel can help determine who should be at the table during deliberations to replicate the Insurance Advisory Committee as closely as possible. Legal counsel will also be able to provide guidance and recommendations regarding the Regional School Committee’s acceptance of the various provisions of sections of MGL 32b, relative to the multiple options that fall under local control.

The processes to consider the many options involved around health insurance need to begin very early in the transition period. It may take a full year to manage and implement this transition.

D. Obtain Federal ID Number and State LEA Number

The Region will need to obtain several ID numbers in order to meet regulations for reporting information and to conduct general business affairs. Examples of this include a Federal ID number (EIN), as well as a tax-exempt number. There will also be a need to work with DESE, in order to have the Region receive its own LEA (Local Education Agency) code. Eventually DESE will cease reporting (MCAS, etc.) and receiving (SIMS/EPIMS etc.) information from local member districts and will transition to the Region, but all of this must be established ahead of time.

Federal Tax Exempt EIN # -- 617-626-5050 (Department of Unemployment Assistance)

State Tax Exempt ID # -- 617-887-6367 (tax exempt status); 617-973-2629 (state comptroller – contractor status); 888-227-2423 (register with the CCR—Central Contractor Registry); 866-705-5711 (obtain a DUNS number—Data Universal Number System); [CCR and DUNS are required for certain government agencies]

DESE LEA (Local Education Agency) Code—call: 781-338-3282
E. **Bank Accounts**

Depository and checking accounts will be opened and a taxpayer ID number is mandated when this occurs. Funds will be transferred during the transition period and will have to be accounted for, when the year-end report is completed, and audits are done. Purchasing of goods/services will mandate tax status information.

F. **Filing EOY (End-of-Year) REPORTS and E&D (Excess and Deficiency)**

New districts must report in both of these areas, even during the transition phase. The EOY, which must be filed on Excel templates, is due at the Department of Revenue no later than September 30 each year. The report notes all revenues received by the school committee and all expenditures from the school committee budget, state or federal funds, revolving accounts or the municipal budget on behalf of the school district that occurred in the fiscal year that just ended the previous June30th. A good introduction to the EOY Report can be found at: http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/accounting/eoy/fy11/memo.html.

Regional School Districts are allowed to maintain an excess and deficiency fund, pursuant to Chapter 71, Section 16B1/2 and further defined in CMR 41.06. The District must submit information to the Department of Revenue to certify the balance in the fund on or before October 31 of each year.

G. **Hire Auditor (M.G.L. c. 71, s. 16E)**

An RFP (Request for Proposal) for an auditor, or auditing firm, should be developed. Ayer Shirley contracted the assistance of a nearby regional school auditor to help write the specifications. Posting and advertising precede interviews. This can be done by the Business Manager with possible assistance by other colleagues. Eventually, a recommendation is made for a Regional School Committee vote. Since the audit is conducted after the end of the fiscal year, this search can be conducted late in the transitional year. See Appendices M1 and M2 for a sample blank audit form and one used by a regional district.

VII. **Budget Development for the First Year of the Region (Including Grants)**

(M.G.L. c. 71, s. 16B, 71, s. 16B 1/2, and 71, s. 16G.5)

Building the first regional budget is one of the most important things that must be done
during the transition year. In some ways, the process is the same as building a local school budget. However, there are also some major differences. One of the differences is finding consensus among School Committee members and voters from multiple towns. In addition, since all state funds will now be directed to the regional district accounts, member towns will only be voting on their share of the regional budget or an assessment. It is also important to note that unlike in municipal districts, only those expenses reported in the school committee budget would count toward meeting the district’s net school spending requirement under the state Chapter 70 program. Again discussion with local town officials will avoid surprises in the budgeting process.

The first fiscal year budget process should begin early in the fall. The Superintendent, with the support of the Business Manager and Central Office staff, should recommend a group of budget assumptions for the Regional School Committee to consider. This would include such issues as staffing levels (e.g., class size, equity among buildings, etc.), union negotiation amounts (contingency, if contracts are not yet settled), balancing textbooks, materials, and supplies among the former separate districts, etc.

Given general acceptance of the Regional School Committee, the Superintendent and administration can begin building a regional budget within the approved budget assumption parameters. The Superintendent should be prepared to present a first pass of the budget at the earliest January School Committee meeting.

It is important to also include the Finance Committees and Boards of Selectmen of all towns in the beginning stages of this budget development. A sub-committee in each community, which includes both town and school elected officials and administrative staff will guide the bottom line process. For example, if each group can agree on a total assessment number or a percentage budget increase near the beginning of the process, the Regional School Committee and the Superintendent/school administration can work toward that number.

It is frequently the case that one community has a greater capacity to meet an assessment number than another community in the same regional school district. It is therefore very important that there is constant communication between the schools, town boards, and the communities to prepare for an eventual assessment (budget) vote in each community.

It is assumed that the School Committee and administration will continue to fine tune the budget, and thus the assessment numbers to the member communities throughout the winter and early spring months. The law requires that the Regional School Committee vote to certify the budget at least forty-five (45) days prior to the earliest community’s Annual Town Meeting.
This number can be decreased right up to and including Town Meeting floor, but it cannot be increased within these forty-five (45) days.

It is important to consider anticipated or continuing grants, revolving funds or general fund revenue when creating your spending plan for the district. Although grants and revolving funds, such as school choice revenue are not included in the school committee budget presented to the town for approval, they may be used to support the district’s overall spending in a given year. Information on sources of revenue to support the districts spending should be presented to the member towns for informational purposes.

During the transition period, it is likely that member communities will need additional funding Support. Expenses for legal and other consultant support, purchase of "systems" (financial software, etc.), and, perhaps, stipends for staff doing significant additional work. These additional services and expenses should be temporary once the new regional district is fully operational. New Regional Districts have been successful in recent years in securing additional funds through the state budget process to support these temporary transition costs.

Appendices N1 and N2 contain regulatory information and language regarding regional school district budgets. Appendix O contains an advisory regarding Stabilization Funds in regional budgets.

VIII. Curriculum and Instruction

There will be a need and a challenge to conduct a thorough and complete analysis of the curriculum in member districts, which includes review of vertical alignment of topics and benchmarks. There will be a similar need to look at texts and materials available throughout the district schools to insure that, once curriculum is aligned and approved, that appropriate series are in place to carry out curriculum goals (especially true in math and reading). Such an undertaking will require creating opportunities to bring staff together under the direction of an individual who “owns” the project. It will likely require commitment of resources to make all of this happen.

Instructional practice and the accoutrements available (whiteboards/projectors/computers, etc.) which support, it need review on several levels as well. This will be one of the many areas where the debate over the issue of promoting parity will become evident.
IX. **Professional Development**

Professional development is an often used term in public education. During the Transition Period, it will take on much greater importance! The implementation of multiple new systems (finance, telephone, technology etc.) and alteration of others (SIMS, EPIMS, MCAS reporting) will demand that staff receive appropriate training to insure efficient transition and use of the new systems. Literally, every person in every job classification will need training to become adept in their work.

The formation of a Professional Development Committee is strongly recommended to define and determine the goals of the program. Research and development projects must be solicited, selected and funded to give staff the opportunity to share best practice and begin to make enhancements to curriculum and instruction. Principals and teachers in content areas and at grade level must be engaged in meaningful meetings to discuss and determine the direction of curriculum. It has been our experience that having someone available to take ownership of this process is critical to the ultimate success of the first year of operation. A Professional Development Committee will assist in developing and implementing a program that will meet staff and district needs and interests. It should include staff from every building, department, Special Education, and related services. Funding/revenue streams should be identified, and the budget process must earmark this need during development.

Bringing staff together at grade level and by discipline to discuss and share materials and techniques will be very important to develop a cohesive staff who understands what each is doing. There will also be a need to follow up on DESE mandates in some areas (e.g., ELL, etc.), to provide opportunities for staff to develop new curriculum ideas and to allow staff time to respond to building and district initiatives.

X. **Staffing for the New Region**

In a new regional district there may be a need for additional personnel, such as a district treasurer required by MGL c. 71, s. 16A, (Please see Appendix P of this manual for a sample list of the Treasurer's responsibilities) and there also may be an opportunity to streamline or reconfigure current staffing. Whenever possible, it is important that individual contracts terminate on June 30, before the new Region begins the next day. This will allow the Superintendent and School Committee to make decisions regarding appropriate staffing for the new Region.
There will be tremendous community pressure to cut "duplicates" and administrators in member communities. Citizens often want to either reduce the budget or use the savings for expanded programs. This will create a tremendous level of anxiety for staff throughout the organization, and there is no way to completely avoid it, regardless of the amount and clarity of communications. When the new region begins, there will only be the need for one Superintendent, Special Education Director, Business Manager, Technology Director, Food Service Director, etc. This may also extend to the other central and business office staff such as: administrative assistants, payroll specialists, account payable and similar support positions. Regionalization may provide the opportunity for reduced costs through the elimination of duplicate positions, but is may also provide the opportunity to provide an increased level of administrative and programmatic support to enhance district operations and programming.

It is possible that as a result of creating a larger structure with increased enrollments and fiscal responsibilities, there is a need for additional positions, such as business or personnel office staff to manage the added fiscal responsibilities and larger student population and staff. Based on discussions held during your planning study, there may also be a desire to hire additional personnel to support elementary education or other programmatic areas. The new Regional School Committee must carefully review and consider its current personnel and make appropriate adjustments, as needed.

Perhaps the greatest area for staff anxiety will be reflected in the hiring timeline. Despite assurances and reassurances, many staff will worry about where they fit in to the regional plan. There is no avoiding this phenomenon completely. Hence, it is critical that the process and steps in the hiring process are communicated to all staff likely to be affected. The posting process needs clarity and explanation and above all consistency for every position. Whenever possible, postings should include job description and other pertinent work/position expectations. Starting as early as possible is the first recommendation, setting a time line, and then following it, is very important. It is also suggested that staff know who and how decisions will be made.

Regionalization does provide an opportunity to make personnel changes that appear to be in the best interests of the new Region. One philosophy is that it is important to find a position for all current staff. Another philosophy is that since all non-teachers are not guaranteed a position and have to apply for a position, only the best candidates for the positions should be hired. These both obviously have some potential political ramifications. A third philosophy is somewhere in the middle of these in that most of the staff is rehired and only those few who are no longer needed are not re-hired.
A. **Administration**

Administrators are not covered by any law which guarantees them a job with the new Region. This leads to a certain amount of angst, even in the best of circumstances. Everyone knows that there will only be one Superintendent, one SPED Director, one Business Manager, etc. It is probable that all administrators will have to apply for their current job or, possibly, another open or contested position. All these administrators are considered “new” administrators and therefore can be given a one-year (up to five) contract.

Although most positions, including administrative positions, are legally hired by the Superintendent or Principals, there are several positions that must be appointed by the School Committee. These positions are recommended by the Superintendent, but are officially appointed by the School Committee. These positions are: Superintendent; Business Manager; Special Education Director; School Physician, Treasurer, and Auditor.

One unique situation is that many administrative positions (e.g., principals) will have to be appointed by the Interim Superintendent, who may or may not be the new Regional Superintendent. This can create an awkward situation. There are ways, however, to address this issue. One possible solution is to have the school committee and Interim Superintendent grant temporary authority to the newly hired Regional Superintendent to make the necessary appointments. Another possible solution is to have the Interim Superintendent and the Regional Superintendent work closely together to identify the best candidate for the open administrative positions. The final candidate is then appointed by the Interim Superintendent.

B. **Teachers**

Because teachers are the only job category specifically protected by statute (Ch 71 Sec 42b), teachers are not required to reapply for their positions. This could be different, if there were significant consolidation of sections and/or services in the new Region, and there were significant numbers of NPTS (Non-Professional Teacher Status) teachers, but that is not likely to be the norm.

C. **Support Personnel**

Postings need to be executed for all positions not held by “teachers.” All support staff, paraprofessionals, cafeteria staff, custodial staff, etc. (and administrative staff as noted
above) will be required to apply for posted positions. No one in these categories is
guaranteed a position. Most of these appointments are normally handled at the
Principal/Director level with occasional input from the Interim Superintendent.

XI. Athletics

The absolute most debated decision that will be made for any new region is uniform color
scheme and mascot for High School athletics --- end of story.

It will be critical to engage the community in the decision making process. Coaches /
advisors, support groups (booster groups, etc.) and alumni, parents and students will all
feel a stake in this process. Engaging all of the players will be critical to the successful
outcome. In many cases, it is these activities that have the greatest galvanizing effect on
the community and cannot be taken lightly.

Within this area some important decisions will occur:
  • League affiliation and divisional competition level—smaller schools become larger
  • Revenue for uniform replacement
  • Consideration of programs available—merged team arrangements with other
districts may end)
  • Development of a fee structure—reflects whatever criteria is decided by the
    Regional School Committee

XII. Special Education

Merging special education programs during the transition year is obviously a very sensitive
and important project. This process is complicated by the merging of administrative,
teaching, and support staff within the Special Education Department.

Here are some of the issues:

A. Communication

This is probably the most important issue that needs to be addressed during the
transition period. Parents will have fears that regionalization will somehow lesson, or
even change, the services which they believe are currently in their children's best
interests. Staff will be concerned about their jobs being moved/changed or even
eliminated in the transition. All of these concerns may be justified in some cases. Communicating openly and honestly will at least preserve the integrity of the process.

B. **Students**

Should some students be moved into a similar program in the other district? Can a new program be created that is cost-efficient to bring back some students currently being served in out-of-district placements? Can current or new resources better meet the needs of students who have Individual Educational Plans? How can students be included in the transition process, if their program/location is going to change? How can unresolved issues between one school district and families be resolved in the new region with combined resources?

C. **Staff**

The first order of business is to have the Regional School Committee appoint a Director of Special Education. [This may be part of a more comprehensive responsibility such as Director of Student Services.] This may be difficult if there are multiple competent SPED Directors already in the various towns being regionalized.

It might be possible that some special education staff will have to move to different buildings and/or programs in order to make the new Special Education Department efficient and able to meet the needs of students. Complicating this issue will involve any unions that support any of the staff in this department. In some cases, a group of staff in one school district (prior to officially regionalizing) may be unionized, and their counterparts in another district may not be unionized. Union or no union, working conditions for staff have to be homogenized.

Staff needs to be included in the transition process. They obviously have a great interest in their own position. They will also have an interest in how programs are merged and developed for students. A significant number of professional development opportunities should be available during the transition process. Part of this will involve the possible change in the special education paperwork process.

D. **Level of Services**

As soon as the administrative structure is in place, work needs to begin on the services for students. It is quite possible that the different separate school districts have different criteria for student services. This has to be addressed early in the transition process to ensure that I.E.P.s written during the transition year, but implemented in the first year of the Region, are written using the Regional philosophy and resources.
Another issue is to merge Special Education transportation. This may involve going out to bid or rearranging current bids, if possible.

E. **Technology**

It is probable that special education administrators will be surprised at the issues related to merging technology requirements into one regional system. A decision will need to be made early on a specific Special Education software package which should be used during the transition year when writing I.E.P.s for the succeeding year. This will take considerable professional development training with the staff.

Assuming an administrator responsible for more than Special Education (e.g., Counseling, Reading, Nursing, etc.), there are other software considerations. For example, the Nursing Staff probably use a software program (e.g., SNAP) to keep track of student and system issues. The Counseling staff also needs to be tied in to a student information system). This department will also need to be involved in the merged phone system.

F. **Location of Services**

Many decisions will need to be made regarding location of administration, programs and staff. During the transition year, the merged administrative staff may move into one of the districts’ locations, or an entirely new location may be determined. New programs will need to find a home, and current programs may be merged, creating the need for different space in the same or different buildings.

It is imperative during this transition period that there is significant personal communication between members of the regional schools and the families of children with IEPs to reassure families that their child’s IEP will carry over into the new district. It is also necessary to make sure that any changes in programs continue to meet the needs of all children with special needs and the requirements of their IEPs.

**XIII. Merging Food Services and Custodial Services**

It is assumed that each of the individual school districts forming a new region will have its own staff and hierarchy. Decisions will first have to be made regarding the leadership of Food Services and Custodial Services. Assuming that all current school buildings will continue to be used, most of the current Food Service and Custodial staff may remain. The new district should contact the DESE’s School Nutrition Program Office to ensure continuity of funds and notifications.
XIV. If Building a New Building or Renovating an Old Building or Combination

The entire building project concept should have been discussed and considered during the Regional Planning Board phase. It will, however, be important to review MGL Ch. 71, sec 16, which details the methods available to districts that will need to borrow in order to fund capital projects. The Regional Planning Board should include details regarding how the borrowing process will occur in the written Regional Agreement.

A. Working with the MSBA (Massachusetts School Building Authority)

As is the case with many communities, a need for a major school building project becomes the driver to get people to the table. Most often, this is for the secondary level. As a result, interaction with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA, 617-720-4466) becomes an integral part of the process. MSBA is more inclined to support combined/regional approaches to high/middle school construction than it is to build multiple smaller projects.

MGL c. 71, s. 16 governs much of the affairs of regions including construction. It, along with the MSBA website “Building With Us” section, does a complete walk-through from Statement of Interest (SOI) through feasibility and financing to project approval. There are a significant number of steps to get a district from concept to reality. Enrollment studies help determine a “building capacity” enrollment figure. A “feasibility study” will help determine educational needs and begin to develop schematic design documents.

The process is intricate and complex, but MSBA will be available to help guide districts through the process. MSBA will partner with the district through the entire process.

B. Appoint a Building Committee

Once the MSBA directs the district to move toward the feasibility phase of the project, the district will need to name a "Building Committee" in accordance with 963 CMR 2.00. The MSBA provides an official form which delineates by position who ought to be a member of the committee. For example, the Local Chief Executive Officer, the Superintendent, Principal, a School Committee member, a local budget official, a member with MCPPO certification, members of the community with construction, engineering or architectural background etc. This is a great opportunity to reach out to local boards and the community as a whole to become involved in a critical school project.
Soliciting volunteers is an important task to perform and will generate interest. The Committee, once formed, must be approved by the Regional School Committee and then submitted to the MSBA. The Building Committee is subject to all open meeting law regulations.

C. Feasibility Study

At some point, the MSBA will approve the district to move forward toward completing a “feasibility study” for the proposed building project. This process is explained in great detail in the previously mentioned "Building with Us" information on the MSBA website. It will require a number of steps to be completed in precise order (beginning with the submission of the Maintenance and Capital Planning survey -- MCP) and will carry the district through OPM (Owner's Project Manager) selection to Designer selection and through the completion of a needs assessment/schematic design.

XV. Building Usage & Leases [see Appendix Q1 and Q2, and MGL c. 71, s. 14C]

One of the first considerations will be how, and if, to use all the buildings currently in each of the towns. It is possible with the consolidation that regionalization allows, not all of the current buildings will be used. Buildings may be utilized in different configurations than currently used. After possible future construction/renovation, the building usage will change. This should have been addressed in the communication leading up to the regionalization vote, but needs continued serious discussion.

Because locally owned school buildings will be used for regional educational purposes, the Regional Agreement will need to address whether the buildings will be purchased or leased. In nearly all instances, leasing is the most simple and preferred option. The lease must be discussed and negotiated with local town officials and will require approval and signature from both the Regional School Committee and Boards of Selectmen or City Councils.

The lease should include clear provisions regarding town/region responsibility for maintenance of building and grounds (including grass mowing and snow removal). [See lease agreement, for an example.] It is possible that a discussion of building/facility needs will be part of the regionalization process. Initially, many districts are brought to the table, because of the need for a building project (most often high school or middle high school configuration). These conversations may lead the Regional Planning Board to consider recommendations for building/facility usage in the early stages of the process. Placement of programs (often special education) and grade level configurations can be influenced by possible building project decisions. A sample lease agreement is in Appendix Q.
XVI. Transportation (MGL c. 71, s. 16C)

Transportation takes on a very different status in a regional district. Regional School Districts are required by Chapter 71, Section 16C to transport K-12 students who live a 1 ½ miles from school or more. Municipal districts are required only to transport K-6 students. DESE provides an excellent guide to transportation on its website. It can be accessed at: http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/transportation/guide.html.

One of the incentives for regionalization is that the cost of transporting regular day K-12 students who live 1 ½ miles or more from school is eligible for state reimbursement (about 55% in FY11). Because it is a reimbursement, the funds may not be available until the second year of regional operation. It may be possible to receive the reimbursement in the first year of operation if the newly formed Regional School District assumes control of and provides transportation during the transition year. Responsibility for transportation should be discussed with DESE during the planning process and included in the regional agreement language. If the Regional District assumes control of transportation during the transition period, the regional must develop a Transportation Policy and outline the process by which they will manage the transportation program during the transition period. Appendix R contains a sample communiqué that one district used to document regular education transportation costs during the transition period. The involvement of DESE and their advice and guidance early in the decision making process for transportation cannot be emphasized enough. Doing this right the first time may bring significant funds to the region during the first year of operation.

It is important that the Regional School Committee develop a transportation policy for the regional district during the transition and after. It is likely that the two or more member districts will have different ridership guidelines and may have different carriers, which will impact the need to put contracts out for bid.

Conclusion

The “transition period” between the town’s vote to regionalize and the actual start date of an operational region is a critical period. During this time, the foundation is laid for all programs, curriculum, facilities, services, staffing, etc. Communication and understanding/following the rules and regulations are key to the successful beginning of any new region.

State funding has been available over the last several years to assist districts as they transition from municipal district to regional district. It is likely that the funds will come through the DESE administered grant process where an application will be filed and a final accounting of expenditures will be required. It would be wise to contact DESE directly about the availability of grant funds and the process to obtain them.