# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions**

1. **Begin Discussions and Contact DESE**

You are interested in looking at regionalization and it's coming up in conversations. Maybe members of the Finance Committee in town have spoken with members of the Board of Selectmen, and maybe (hopefully) members of the School Committee have been included in these conversations as well. You have many questions and even some concerns, and you know you need data to inform any decision that you eventually may make. But where do you begin? You can begin right here.

The process to form a new regional school district may take up to three years. The first year is devoted to conversations about the prospect of forming or expanding a region, beginning to collect the necessary data and scheduling meetings where regionalization can be discussed.

The second year of the process is taken up with scheduling and securing votes at Town Meetings to establish a Regional Planning Board so that a formal study of regionalization can occur. During this study phase, if a decision is made to move forward with a positive recommendation, the Planning Board begins to develop a regional agreement and long range plan and schedule public forums that ultimately will lead to a town meeting vote to act on the proposed regionalization plan.

The third year of the process is not required but is recommended. A Transition Period is now allowed under 603 CMR 41.03(5) which may last from six months to a year and a half. During this period, the member districts retain their own school committees while the new regional district elects or appoints its own school committee and superintendent to begin the work needed to assume full control of the regional district. At the conclusion of the transition period, the member districts no longer have their own school committees and the new regional district is fully operational.

In this manual, Phase I addresses the first two years of the process, taking the reader up through the process of Town Meeting Votes, at which time the new region is approved by the voters or not. If the vote is positive, the second part of the manual (Phase II) will be needed. Phase II of this manual addresses the recommended transition time, which could be a third year of the process. Information contained therein takes the district through the process of becoming a fully functioning independent school district.

So let's begin.

If you have not already included the Finance Committee, Board of Selectmen and School Committee in your informal discussions, add them to the group now. The School Committee could take the lead and bring in the Finance Committee and Select Board. As you begin to meet more formally and include more members in your meetings, make sure you comply with Open Meeting Law regulations regarding posting the meeting if any of the departments will have a quorum present at the meeting. Someone should be identified as responsible for keeping track of the data collected and what was discussed, as this information will be needed later on.

Open and honest discussions with all stakeholders will only make this process a success, no matter if the outcome is regionalization, collaboration without governance, or a combination of effort.

Several important questions need consideration during this early part of the process, such as what are the strengths of your district and what are the areas where you are not strong? . In Appendix F, we have included a “Self-Assessment Tool to Measure District Capacity” that was developed by the Legislative Commission on School District Collaboration and Regionalization. We recommend that you use this tool to assess your strengths as a district and areas needing improvement. It can help you determine what issues need to be addressed in your school system, such as do you have declining enrollment, facility or financial issues or are you struggling to maintain appropriate programs for your students? Are you part of an existing region and looking to expand grade levels or to formalize an existing affiliation such as a tuition arrangement or superintendency union? Do you have a partnering district in mind? When considering regionalization, school districts often seek alliances with other like-district partners. In most cases, geographic location becomes the initial jumping off point, but then districts examine and begin to identify other similarities.

Four state organizations can provide you with important data for your district and town. We recommend that you review the information provided on the following websites:

* The M.I.S.C. (Management Information for School Committees) from the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) at: [**http://www.masc.org**](http://www.masc.org/), under Publications.
* The D.A.R.T. (District Analysis and Review Tool) from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) at: **http://www. doe.mass.edu/apa/dart**. (See Appendix D.)
* Enrollment projections from the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) at: <http://www.massschoolbuildings.org>.
* Department of Revenue Municipal Data Bank. <http://www.mass.gov/dor/local-officials/municipal-data-and-financial-management/data-bank-reports/>.

Combining data gleaned from these sources with information from internal resources will better inform your future decisions. As you begin this process, one of the most important tasks you will face is to “uncover the questions.” Let's examine the five topic areas that generate the most common questions concerning regionalization.

**Question 1: Academics**

Review your existing Educational Plan, and see where you want to make changes and improvements. Assess your programmatical priorities and focus. Do your potential partners have a similar perspective? Consider factors such as four-year and five-year graduation rates, college placement rates, AP scores and course offerings, and MCAS and AYP status that are relevant to ***your*** discussion. How have you articulated your educational philosophy across your curriculum? Examine what you believe are your strengths and challenges. Consider whether these factors align with the districts with which you might want to explore the question of regionalization in greater detail. Review the assessments your district utilizes currently, with an eye to what works well and what your educational community might want to add, modify or remove. Does your current configuration limit the breadth of educational opportunities in the classroom and access to extracurricular activities that could create a better learning experience? The design of your class day and year, as well as potential partners, needs to be understood. Do they align, and if not, are there philosophical differences that would conflict? What are your community beliefs regarding "user fees?" Do your neighbors hold these priorities? Press clippings from previous debates can reveal many answers. There are also opportunities to explore if negotiation or compromise can be found.

**Question 2: Quality of Programs and Services**

Are there programs or services you wish you could be providing to your students? Have you seen these programs in neighboring communities? You may discover your neighbors covet programs and services that you offer. Will consolidation of administrative/central office personnel and services afford greater supervision, direction and flexibility that could benefit student learning? Pursuing the conversation could lead to an expansion of services that will benefit all of your students.

**Question 3: Technology**

The most effective place to start looking at technology is to review your most recently submitted Technology Plan, submitted annually to DESE. Are you meeting your instructional and administrative technology needs? What technology goals do you have and what are potential obstacles preventing you from achieving your goals? Are the districts you are considering regionalizing with in a similar situation? Do they hold similar priorities in this area? This is an essential area to question as it influences educational instruction and delivery, professional development for faculty and staff, central office functions and potentially building project needs. Understand your stakeholders’ needs fully to avoid pursuing the wrong priority.

**Question 4: Physical Plant**

Next to fiscal challenges, facility issues are the second most common reason districts consider regionalization. Do you face school closures due to declining enrollment, or expansions due to increased program requirements? Can you make better use of your existing school facilities? If you have a major renovation or substantive repairs now or in the near future, MSBA requires you to consider neighboring communities with which to build or consolidate. MSBA has directed much of its funding and focus to districts considering a new or expanded regional school district. The funding crisis has caused everyone to consider opportunities in regionalization that might otherwise have been overlooked.

**Question 5: Fiscal Issues**

Limited and/or exhausted financial resources at the local level drive most discussions. Districts seek potential district educational partners with similar (or better) fiscal health and long-term stability. Taking a look at Chapter 70 information for each district involved could be helpful. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/chapter70/>. If you are considering regionalization, examine a span of time for your district and your prospective partner(s) to better assess the differences between trend and aberration. Gather and review your collective bargaining agreements and then compare them with the M.I.S.C. and D.A.R.T. reports. You can read the actual agreements on-line on the DESE website. Begin to analyze what costs may be associated with consolidating salary and benefit packages between you and future partners.

At the conclusion of this initial discussion (and the many throughout this process), always return to these questions: *Is the learner learning?* *What can we do to raise student achievement and success?*

This is a good time to reach out to DESE and share with the Department information about the conversations that have taken place and to discuss your timeline. One member of your group should call:

The Office of School Governance

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

781-338-6520

It is important to have DESE officials involved early in the process to provide technical assistance and advice. All proposals for a new or amended regional school district agreements must be approved by all member towns and by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education prior to the December 31 in order for the agreement to become effective the following July 1. It is important to discuss the timeline of your study with DESE. Regional School District Regulations (603 CMR 41.03) outlines the necessary steps to secure the Commissioner’s approval. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr41.html?section=03>.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions**

1. **Identify Incentives to Regionalize**

The incentives for school districts to consider forming or joining a regional school district generally fall into one or more of three categories:

1. Educational incentives
2. Fiscal incentives
3. Building incentives

Let us take a closer look at each of these incentives, starting with educational incentives.

1. Concern for maintaining a strong educational program with excellent curricular and extra-curricular offerings can be a stimulus for districts to form or join a regional school district. When school districts are small, they are often limited in the scope and breadth of courses and extra-curricular programs they can offer their students. Some programs and services must be offered on a part-time basis. Finding qualified staff to teach on a part-time basis can be challenging. When school districts combine and pool their resources, they can gain flexibility in staffing and increase their ability to

offer a more diverse program of studies taught by highly qualified staff, and offer a richer array of extra-curricular activities.

2. Many districts have formed regions because they were seeking financial stability. State aid to schools and towns has reduced over the last decade while district costs have risen. Declining student enrollment and increased costs of instructional materials, transportation, utilities and contracted services along with staggering increases in health insurance costs have caused many districts to consider cost sharing with other similar districts through the regionalization process. By forming a region, the member towns were able to pool resources to improve administrative efficiency and reduce redundancy of positions, achieve financial stability and increase their sustainability.

Additionally, a major financial incentive to form a region has been receiving reimbursement for regional transportation, which is applied for all students who live a mile and one half or more from the school. While the level of reimbursement has fluctuated in recent years, it has consistently been in the mid 50% range or higher.

3. Facility issues can also stimulate school districts and towns to consider joining or forming a regional district. Are you experiencing over-crowding in your schools? Are the facilities in need of major renovation or replacement? If the answer to either question is yes, the town and school district could be faced with the need to fund expensive repairs or a building project and may be seeking assistance through the Massachusetts School Building Authority. MSBA has established criteria and potential incentives for regionalizing for districts who wish to apply for funds. One such criterion for small towns and school districts is that they must consider regionalizing with another town or towns. MSBA is much more likely to consider funding the building or renovation of schools designed to serve the combined school population of two or more small towns that formed a region.

# Phase I: Forming/Expanding a Regional School District

**Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions**

1. **Determine Type of Region**

During the fact-finding, data collection and discussion process, it is important to consider the current configuration of your school district and any affiliations that you have with neighboring districts in order to move onto a further discussion on the type of regional school district you may want to deliberate. Part of the decision may be directed by your or other district(s) current configuration and demographics.

Additional information on the current configuration of school districts in MA is provided in a DESE report entitled *School District Consolidation in Massachusetts*. This report provides a brief history of regionalization; explains the complex web of relationships that already exist among districts; looks at some demographic, fiscal, and programmatic factors that might motivate districts to regionalize; and uncovers some lessons from a recent series of regionalization studies. This reportis located on the DESE web site at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2009/11consolidation.pdf>. Information on the fifty-eight academic regions, the twenty six vocational regions and the sixteen superintendency unions may be found on the DESE website at<http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/regional/>. Discussions regarding the type of regional school should include such questions as: What will the grade configurations be? What school facilities would be needed? Where would they be located? Do we want to form an academic or vocational regional school district? Do we want to establish a superintendency union as a first step? What are our options?

There are five different models of regionalization, as depicted in the attached diagram. In addition, Massachusetts school districts often have formed superintendency unions to create cost efficiencies. A supervisory union is formed between two or more school committees for the purpose of jointly hiring central administrative staff. In this arrangement, each district maintains its autonomy and has its own school committee but shares one superintendent and may also share central office staff and possibly other staff. A Supervisory Union may offer cost efficiencies, but also presents a complex form of governance. Superintendents who work in supervisory unions work with multiple school committees, prepare multiple budgets and file multiple reports. However, often, this is the first step toward a more formal affiliation as a regional school district. Examples of current supervisory unions that share central office staff with their regional school district are Union 3, comprised of the elementary districts of Northboro and Southboro and the Northboro-Southboro Regional School District and Union 54, comprised of the elementary districts of Brewster, Eastham, Orleans and Wellfleet and the Nauset Regional School District serving secondary students from the same member towns. Other superintendency unions have no affiliation with a regional school district. An example would be Union 43, comprised of the school districts of Clarksburg, Florida, Monroe and Savoy.

The regional model selected will be based on what type of region is the best fit for the individual districts involved in the planning study.

**Model #1: Two or More Towns form Regional District**

Two or more towns join to form a new regional school district. Regionalization can occur at the elementary school level, the secondary school level or K-12. There are thirty-four K-12 districts. Examples of a K-12 model include the K-12 regional district of; Adams-Cheshire, Ashburnham-Westminster, Dennis Yarmouth and the newest regional districts of Ayer-Shirley and Monomoy (Chatham-Harwich). Secondary Regions include Concord-Carlisle and Masconomet. Two examples of an Elementary School Region are Chesterfield-Goshen and New Salem-Wendell.

**Model #2: Current Region Enlarges to include new Town(s)**

An existing regional school district enlarges to include one or more new towns not currently in the region. The Southwick-Tolland Region is an example of this model. The two town K-12 district recently enlarged its membership to include the town of Granville.

**Model #3: Current Region expands to include additional grade levels**

An existing secondary region or an elementary region expands to encompass grades

K-12. The member towns of the existing 5-12 Freetown-Lakeville Regional District recently approved the expansion of the district to encompass grades K-12. Most of the existing K-12 regional school districts started as a secondary regional school district.

**Model #4: Region is Combination of Secondary Region, Elementary Region and Unions**

Member towns of an existing secondary region may also belong to a separate elementary region that may or may not share the same central office staff through a superintendency union. The Hampshire Region is a 7-12 regional district comprised of five towns. Two of the town members at the secondary level are also members of an elementary regional district. The secondary region, the elementary region and the three municipal elementary districts all share central office services through Union 66. This is a more complicated model but one that has been used by the members of Hampshire, Mahar, Mohawk and Martha’s Vineyard Regional School Districts.

**Model #5: Vocational Technical School Districts**

There are twenty-six regional vocational technical school districts in MA, serving 234 member cities and towns. In addition, municipal districts often offer their vocational programming. Use of this model would typically involve a non-member of a regional vocational district requesting membership. However, some municipal vocational schools and neighboring member towns have expressed interest in forming additional regional vocational school districts. The Step by Step process may be adapted to assist communities interested in joining or forming a regional vocational school district. Assabet Valley, Nashoba Valley and Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational School Districts are but three examples of the 26 regional vocational technical high school districts operating in our state.

**MA Regionalization Models**

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions**

1. **Utilize Self-Assessment Tool for Measuring District Capacity**

In 2010, the Massachusetts Legislature formed the Commission on Regionalization and Collaboration to study regionalization and the use of collaboratives across the state. The full report of the Commission can be accessed at: <http://www.malegislative.gov/Committees/187/Document/Joint/J14/Commission-Sch>.

To aid in its study, the Commission developed this assessment tool. The purpose of the tool is to measure district capacity, which the Commission defines as the ability of a district to provide a quality education for its students. The tool is constructed in survey format. It is highly recommended that any district considering joining or forming a region make use of this tool. Appendix **F** of this manual contains a copy of the tool.

The assessment tool consists of 61 indicators that reflect specific conditions within the school district. The indicators are presented as statements, requiring users to indicate a “yes” or “no” response depending on whether or not the statement applies to the district. The indicator statements are specifically structured such that an affirmative response suggests a deficient or decreasing level of capacity. To this end, the tool offers a way for users to pinpoint specific dimensions or areas of capacity that likely require further development or examination.

The survey can be used by school district leaders, local stakeholders and members of the general public to perform an initial capacity analysis in order to:

1. Identify the areas of capacity that are strongest and those that need improvement;
2. Establish the foundation upon which to engage in further analyses and targeted discussions about regionalization, collaboration, or other capacity-building initiatives; and
3. Inform ongoing discussions about the capacity of the school district and ways to improve programs and services.

The tool can also be used to establish a baseline for measuring changes over time and assessing the impact of various reform initiatives. Moreover, the tool is designed to be user-friendly and accessible to local school leaders and members of the general public alike, which can allow communities to disseminate important information to help foster a community-wide dialogue about the strengths and weaknesses of the local school district.

While the self-assessment tool contains a targeted list of indicators that are specific to regionalization and collaboration, the tool can be adapted and expanded in order to meet individual district's capacity assessment needs. In addition, while the Commission developed this tool as a way to support the local assessment process, it can also be used to carry out various statewide initiatives and assessment purposes.

The assessment tool directs users to a variety of available data and existing resources and requires users to complete a series of “yes” or “no” questions based on this corresponding data. Most measurements are based on trends and/or a comparison to “like districts.” The trend can be several years, five years or more.  The “like districts” can be based on enrollment, Department of Revenue information, neighboring districts or any grouping that may be viewed as similar. However, the Commission strongly recommends that users also refer to the ESE District Analysis and Review Tool (DART) to determine a list of ten comparable districts, which the DART identifies using a precise calculation that matches districts by district type and by other variables such as total enrollment, percentage of low income students, percentage of English language learners, and the percentage of special education students. The DART can be found at: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/dart/>. Sample DART reports are available in Appendix **D** of this document.

In order to streamline the assessment process, the tool identifies specific resources and/or data that can be used to properly answer each of the questions in the far right column of the survey grid. A brief description of each of these sources and directions for using the data to complete the assessment are outlined in Appendix **D**.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions**

1. **Determine Advantages to Regionalization**

There are many advantages for school districts when they join an existing regional school district or join other independent districts to form a new region. Some examples of advantages that have been noted in previous studies and compiled by DESE are listed below. The list largely pertains to PreK-12 districts and all advantages may not be applicable to districts exploring other models.

* A single school committee with cohesive educational policy for all K-12 students
* A single administration with potential for more efficient and economical operation of school departments
* A coordinated curriculum, kindergarten through grade twelve
* Expanded curricular offerings due to fiscal efficiencies to serve increased number of students from combined enrollments
* Fuller utilization of teachers and other staff and school facilities
* Opportunity to offer more enrichment within school curriculum
* Opportunity to expand athletic programs and extra-curricular activities
* Coordinated program of testing, guidance, health services and support services
* A single salary schedule and set of bargaining agreements for staff in each bargaining unit
* A single budget, administered to take advantage of efficient, centralized purchasing techniques and coordinated transportation
* Expansion of critical mass to gain economies of scale and aggregated purchasing power of goods and services
* Opportunity for more administrative capacity at the district and school level
* Opportunity to redirect leadership time and energy to educational programs through a reduction of duplicative effort in business procedures, reporting and negotiations
* Expanded offerings could lead to fewer students leaving district under School Choice
* State regional transportation reimbursement
* Additional reimbursement points may be granted by MSBA for regional school building projects

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions**

1. **Determine the Challenges to Regionalization**

The decision whether or not to regionalize must be made by each member town. We have already considered some of the advantages to forming a regional school district. Such a process, however, is not without its challenges or fears, which should be thoroughly considered as well. It is important to note that many fears are unfounded while others are based on specific circumstances that may have occurred in one regional district. For instance, the fear that local elementary schools will close and young students will be transported across town borders is not supported by fact. While some towns have formed a regional district for the purpose of building a joint school building, generally it has been for the purpose of serving middle or high school grade level students. It has been a rare occurrence that elementary schools have closed as a result of regionalization. Another common misconception is that teachers will lose their jobs as the new region "cleans house." Teacher benefits are protected by law (MGL Chapter 71, Sections 42B and 43). Although it is possible in specific circumstances that some staffing positions may be eliminated or reconfigured due to consolidation, in actuality, few school or teaching staff have lost jobs as a result of regionalization

The following list of challenges and perceived challenges is a composite of those that have been presented/voiced in the past and can be divided into four major categories. Many of these fears can be alleviated by a well-crafted Regional Agreement, which can be designed to address issues of the towns. If the fear that local schools would be closed is considered an obstacle to the process, the Regional Agreement can be tailored to include language describing how local input would be part of any such decision; that local officials would have a say.

**Educational and/or Social Differences:**

* Feared loss of focus on elementary education
* Differences in financial support of education in member towns
* Differences in educational goals and objectives
* Real or perceived social differences

**Local Control and Community Distinctiveness:**

* Unwillingness to share control with neighboring towns
* A fear of loss of local pride and control
* Loss of community voice through reduction of School Committee representation
* Potential change in administrative leadership and staff
* Loss of town control of state aid when funds are distributed directly to the regional district
* Loss of direct budget control and control of school buildings
* Potential for closing town school buildings
* Concern for job security and impact on teacher salaries, benefits and professional status

**Resistance to Any Change/Misconceptions:**

* Fear that elementary students will be transported across town lines and with longer bus rides
* Refusal to recognize the shortcomings of the small school district
* Belief that smaller is better with more individualized attention to students
* Belief that the town is doing its best for students and the joint district would be too far removed from understanding of town desires and interests
* Fear there will be more state control
* Fear there will be more bureaucracy in a larger regional administration
* Fear there will be larger schools and larger class sizes

**Financial:**

* Fear that regional districts cost more to operate
* Objection of wealthy districts to joining with poorer districts for fear of having to pay an undue share of the costs of the new district
* Poorer districts fearing increased taxes to meet higher standards
* Impact of state aid calculations - Belief that more state aid, or a change in the state aid formula or a reduction of state and/or federal mandates will resolve existing financial challenges and allow the existing towns to remain solvent
* Unwillingness to share budget control over educational spending
* Absorption of town-related services and costs into regional budget
* Potential increased costs due to:

1. Requirement to hire a regional treasurer;
2. Additional costs to coordinate technology, align curriculum and school schedules, negotiate and combine contracts and leases, etc.;
3. Merging collective bargaining agreements;
4. Legal costs to develop the regional agreement and negotiate contracts;
5. Cost of buy-in if a small town is joining an existing region;

* Credibility of the state - lack of trust in continued state reimbursement for regional transportation
* Potential loss of state construction aid if closing a school building recently constructed or renovated with state funds
* Changes in operational assessment methodology under the education reform law requiring towns to pay according to their ability based on state formula and not on a per-pupil basis

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 1 - Preliminary Discussions**

1. **Request Town Meeting for Appointing a Planning Committee**

If you find the initial conversations within your district productive and wish to more fully explore regionalization for your school community, then the next step is to form a Regional Planning Committee (MGL Chapter 71, Sec. 14). The local school district needs to identify the upcoming Town Meeting dates, and work with members of the local Board of Selectmen to place on the Town Meeting warrant a vote to form a Regional Planning Committee. Sample language for such a warrant article can be found in Appendix **G**.

It should be understood that the vote authorizes the formation of a committee to ***study*** regionalization. It does not authorize the formation of the region. This initial vote provides a process by which the town can gather pertinent information and report back its findings about forming a region or modifying an existing one. The vote by the electorate to authorize regionalization will only take place after all of the issues have been examined. To prepare for the up-coming Town Meeting votes, your group will need to share the information you learned during your data gathering and initial discussions with the community. The information should include:

* Enrollment Data - enrollment for the past five years and at least five years going forward
* Physical Plant Issues (MSBA funding tie-ins)
* Instructional Issues
* Fiscal Issues
* Advantages & Challenges to forming/joining a regional school district
* Other information important to ***your*** community

Determine the best way to share this information with the community prior to Town Meeting. Your neighbors deserve an ***effective dissemination*** of facts to cast an informed vote. Consider doing the following:

* Select your presenter(s)
* Create and distribute pamphlets (distributed throughout the town(s) and/or at a Community Forum)
* Create a PowerPoint presentation (cable access and/or Community Forum)

Work with the press to get your message out to the Community in advance of the vote.

If the vote is "No," the process comes to an end unless and until a subsequent vote is taken. If the vote is "Yes," you may move on to Step 2.Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Form Regional School District Planning Committee**

If your vote passes at Town Meeting, the Town Moderator selects a special, unpaid three-member Regional School District Planning Committee (also known as the Regional Planning Committee) from members of his/her own town. One member of the committee must be a current school committee member. The Town Moderator should inform the superintendent of the outcome of the vote and provide the names of the three individuals appointed to serve on the Regional School District Planning Committee.

At the same Town Meeting or at a subsequent meeting, the voters may appropriate funds for the committee to use, not exceeding one tenth of one per cent of the assessed value of the Town in the prior year. These funds can be used to expand the level of study of advantages and challenges with regionalization. They can be used to: hire a consultant to assist in the research and to facilitate meetings; hire a financial analyst to help work out the financial pros and cons of the proposed new regional district, and to hire legal counsel to offer guidance along the way and assist, as necessary, in the drafting of a new or amended Regional Agreement.

If an existing region plans to expand its membership or grade configuration, the regional school committee may form its own three member planning committee and follow the amendment procedure outlined in the existing regional agreement.

The legal reference for the establishment of the Regional Planning Committee and then the Regional Planning Board, as well as the authorization to secure funds, is Chapter 71, Section 14A: <http://www.malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section14>.

*"Any town, by vote in town meeting duly called therefore, may create a special unpaid committee to be known as a regional school district planning committee, to consist of three members, including one member of the school committee, to be appointed by the moderator; and may at the same meeting or at a subsequent meeting appropriate for the expense of said committee such sum or sums, not exceeding one tenth of one per cent of the assessed valuation of such town in the preceding year, as it may deem necessary. Regional school district planning committees from any two or more towns may join together to form a regional school district planning board or boards. Such regional school district planning board shall organize forthwith upon its formation by the election of a chairman and secretary-treasurer."*

Once the members are appointed, the Regional Planning Committee must convene and begin to formalize a plan to continue the study of regionalization. One of the first tasks for the Regional Planning Committee will be finding an appropriate partner. Some towns may already have an obvious affiliation. They may be part of a secondary region, they may tuition students to a neighboring town or they may have a history of cooperating with a neighboring town. Your town may have these affiliations or you may have already identified a town with similar goals and objectives in your preliminary studies.

If you have identified an appropriate partner to continue your study, you may now form a Regional Planning Board, which is addressed in the next section.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Form Planning Board and Elect Officers**

The members of the town’s Regional Planning Committee will join with the members of the Regional Planning Committee(s) from another Town(s) to create the **Regional School District Planning Board**.

The Superintendent from one of the member towns or the Chair of one of the Planning Committees will then select a meeting date, time and location and post the meeting with an agenda. He/she will call to order the first meeting of the Board. That individual should then contact the Regional Schools Liaison in DESE’s Office of School Governance to provide notification that a new Regional Planning Board has been established.

As the first order of business, he/she will conduct the election of the Chairperson of the Board, who will then chair the remainder of the meeting. At the first meeting, the Board will also elect a Secretary and Treasurer. The Board may choose to elect a Vice Chair to assist the Chair and fill in as necessary, and a Recorder to take the minutes at the meetings and make them available to the members. The following responsibilities are charged to the Board:

* Study the fiscal and educational advisability of establishing a Regional School District
* Determine the region’s organization, operation and control
* Examine the construction, maintenance and operation of a school or schools to meet the needs of the District, assess the educational soundness and estimate the construction and operating costs
* Develop a Long-Range Education and Structural Plan
* Request a Reorganization Needs Conference with DESE
* Submit a report of its findings and recommendations to the Selectmen of the respective Towns

The Regional School District Planning Board must follow Massachusetts Open Meeting Law and post all meetings along with the agenda for the meeting. The Open Meeting Law is addressed in M.G.L. c. 30A, Section 18-24 and in 940 CMR 29.00. It can be found at: [www.mass.gov/ago/openmeeting](http://www.mass.gov/ago/openmeeting).

The Regional School District Planning Board should consider hiring a study consultant to assist the Board in this phase of its work. A full study of regionalization requires an analysis of the financial benefits as well as costs, physical plant issues, instructional service delivery and capacity, design of the school day and year, extracurricular activities, personnel and non-personnel contracts (transportation, energy), fiscal health and stability (actual vs. projected), and other related matters of importance to each community. The study must focus on areas of greatest concern to school and municipal leaders in each community. The Board should compile the data gathered earlier regarding enrollment projections, instructional and curriculum articulation, advantages and challenges studied by the individual planning committees, and expand the data search as necessary. Section Step 2, Part e (page 23) of this manual will focus on collecting and studying data.

The Board may also recommend if a Transitional Period will be necessary to ensure the uninterrupted success of the current school operations while establishing the new regional structure. If appropriate, a Transitional Period may be included in the regional school district agreement. Suggested language and the purpose of the transition period are further explained in Step 3 of this manual. If funds are needed to support the activities required to successfully transition from a municipal to a regional structure, a budget should be prepared and discussed with local legislators as well as the Regional Schools Liaison at DESE. Contact information is provided in Appendix **C**.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Hire Consultants**

Forming a new regional school district or modifying an existing one to accommodate additional grade levels or towns can be a challenging and time-consuming process. It is recommended that the Regional Planning Board hire consultants very early in the regionalization process to guide and assist the Board in completing the steps involved. The Board could benefit from contracting the services of three different consultants: a regionalization process consultant, a financial consultant and an attorney to provide legal consultation.

The process consultant should be an individual who is well-versed in the regionalization process and who has held a leadership position in a regional school or union district. He or she can provide the committee with important information regarding the step-by-step process that Boards need to follow to form a new region or modify and existing one, with particular attention to state laws and DESE regulations regarding regionalization. Such a consultant can also assist the Board in the development of a communications plan to keep the public apprised, present information at public forums and provide assistance in writing the new or revised Regional Agreement.

The financial consultant can be invaluable in assessing district data to help the Board determine the financial advantages and possible financial challenges if they were to regionalize or modify their current region. The financial consultant can also explain changes in Chapter 70 funding; regional transportation reimbursement; and the difference between the "statutory method" of determining the assessment to the towns and the "alternative assessment method." See: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr41.html>.He or she could also advise the Board as it develops its first regional budget.

Legal Counsel will be needed to assist the Board in developing the new Regional Agreement or modifying the existing one. There may also be legal questions that arise along the way that should be addressed by an attorney. The Planning Board can use Counsel from a member town or hire an attorney that is experienced in regionalization.

If funds were approved at Town Meeting to be used by the Planning Committee, they can be used to hire these consultants. From time to time, state grant funds have been made available to districts that are looking to form a new region or modify an existing one. Such grant funds could be used to hire any or all of these consultants.

Regional Planning Board members may wonder where they could find individuals who could serve as their consultants. Several state organizations can be helpful in recommending consultants. It is suggested that you contact one or more of the following:

* MASS (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents)

756 Marrett Road, Lexington, MA 02421

781-541-5098

781-541-5534 - FAX

<http://www.massupt.org/>

* MASC (Massachusetts Association of School Committees)

One McKinley Square, Boston, MA 02109

1-800-392-6023, or 617-523-8454

<http://www.masc.org>

* MARS (Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools)

99 Town Farm Road

Westminster, MA 01473

413-821-2890

[www.massassociationregionalschools.org](http://www.massassociationregionalschools.org)

The Planning Board should use the RFP (Request for Proposals) process to hire the consultants. A sample RFP for Legal Services can be found in Appendix **E**. The Planning Board could use the sample RFP or design its own. The sample could also be modified and used to hire the regional consultant and the financial consultant.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Confirm Selection of Regional School Model**

In your early discussions and before the Regional Planning Committee and then the Regional Planning Board were formed, you were encouraged to identify what model of regional school district would be the best fit for your new district. Since that time, you no doubt have collected considerable data. It is a good time to review the information the information you have gathered and confirm that you have selected the model that is most appropriate.

Just to review the information, there are five different models of regional school districts. The model you select will be based on what you feel is the best fit for you. The five models are:

**Model #1** Two or more towns join to form a new regional school district.

**Model #2** A current PreK-12 regional school district expands to include one or more new towns not currently in a region.

**Model #3** A secondary region with two or more elementary town school systems or an elementary region form a new PreK-12 region.

**Model #4** A secondary region with two or more elementary school systems forms a PreK- 12 with one or more of the towns but not all that are members of the

secondary region. This is one of the more complex models for regional school districts.

**Model #5** This model provides for the formation of a regional school district to serve vocational technical high schools.

Occasionally, districts may consider forming a Supervisory Union as a transition to forming a new regional school district. A supervisory union is formed between two or more towns. In a supervisory union, each district maintains its autonomy and has its own school committee but shares one superintendent and may also share central office staff and possibly other staff. Like Model #4, supervisory unions present a more complex form of regional school in terms of management. Multiple school committees work with a common superintendent and central office.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Collect and Study Data**

We have already noted that you will need to gather a considerable amount of data. Let us now take a closer look at exactly what the information should address and where it can be found. Helpful information may be obtained by a review of the laws (MGL c. 71, s. 14-16I) and regulations (603 CMR 41.00, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr41.html>).

Much of the data is available within the districts, while other data can be secured by contacting the DESE and the MSBA or a review of their web sites.

DESE**:** <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/>

MSBA: <http://www.massschoolbuildings.org/>

The Regional Planning Board should consider hiring a study consultant and/or a financial analyst to navigate all of the information needed to identify the issues and make an informed decision. The data gathered will provide the basis to address such questions as:

* Why do we need a new or expanded regional school district?
* What would the new district look like?
* What would be the grade configurations?
* What would the educational goals, objectives and curriculum offerings be like?
* What facilities would we need and possibly not need anymore?
* What are the fiscal issues?
* Who should be involved in the process?
* What would the administrative structure be like?
* How would the new School Committee be formed? How big? How would the representation and voting be determined?
* How would regionalization change our membership/affiliations with vocational programs and other service deliveries?
* How would regionalization affect our financial relationships with our municipalities?
* How would we construct a regional school budget?
* How would we apportion capital and operating costs?
* Are there state grants to assist in this process?

The following is a suggested list of data by category:

**Educational:**

* School enrollment projections - you will want to include five years of present and past enrollment and a minimum of five years of projected enrollments. You can obtain this information by calling the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) at 617-720-4466 and asking for the enrollment projections for your district. This is a free service. This information can also be obtained by accessing the MSBA website at:
* <http://www.massschoolbuildings.org/>. However, direct access to enrollment information from the website will require a user name and password, which are assigned to the school district.
* Evaluation/ assessment data including:
* MCAS scores for recent years for all schools (available at: [www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu));
* Most recent Coordinated Program Review (special education) documentation for all districts;
* New England Association of School and Colleges (NEASC) documentation for secondary school(s);
* Copies of other school assessment documents as appropriate; and
* Results of Capacity Study from Step 1.d and Appendix F.
* Copies of the Program of Studies for all schools.

**Facilities:**

* Ownership, location and use of all school buildings and building plans, as appropriate.
* Facility assessments for all towns: conditions, capacity, projected capital expenditures and current debt and MSBA application materials, as appropriate. MSBA may have useful information.

**Financial:**

* Current school budgets for all involved districts.
* Copy of most recent audit documents for all districts, as appropriate.
* Salary schedules for all staff including:
  + Stipends paid to staff;
  + Longevity payments paid to staff; and
  + Summary of benefits paid to each collective bargaining unit.
* Historical Chapter 70 state aid and local requirements data for each town. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/chapter70/>
* Assessment methodology and figures for member towns, if joining an existing region.
* Projected savings or costs of regionalizing.
* Costs for consultants to work on the data.
* Sources of possible state grants to support the regionalization process.

**Organizational and Demographic:**

* The current Regional Agreement if joining an existing regional district.
* School Calendars for all districts considering the new regional district.
* Organizational chart.
* Copies of any regional studies done by the districts in the past.
* Demographics of each community – (available at: <http://www.mass.gov/dor/> ).
* Knowledge of each districts obligations, contracts and affiliations.

**Staffing:**

* Number of teachers on each step and column of each contract.
* Collective Bargaining Agreements of each town for:

a. Teachers

b. Secretaries

c. Paraprofessionals

d. Custodians

e. Cafeteria Workers

f. Other, if applicable

* Non-teaching staff and their location on the salary schedule.

**Transportation:**

* Copies of current bus contracts or relevant data if transportation vehicles are owned by the district or municipality.
* Transportation costs for each town for in district and out of district students.
* Regional Transportation reimbursement if joining an existing region – on DESE web site at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/transportation/>.

Include any other data deemed necessary and appropriate. The data you gather will not only help to inform choices that you make along the way, but it will be useful for completion of a Long Range Education and Structural Plan that you will need to submit to DESE. More information will be given about this report in Section: Phase 1, Section 3b (page 45).

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Develop Communications Plan**

This section deals with the development of a solid communications plan that will be instrumental in educating the public on the benefits of regionalization.

The first step in the communications effort is to assign the task of developing and managing the Regional Planning Board’s Communications Committee. Those individuals will focus on:

* Developing a plan that ensures that the public is made aware of the regional planning process using all available media outlets
* Ensuring that any information provided to the community (local and state officials, as well as the public) is accurate, consistent and clear
* Providing multiple opportunities for the public to learn about the regional planning process and provide input
* Building and maintaining the level of public awareness and support and maintaining it throughout the process rather than just before town votes

The individual(s) charged with this task may be considered your Communications Sub-Committee and a Chair should be designated to guide and represent the group. As this group begins to work on this important aspect of the regionalization process, keep in mind that as a sub-committee, all meetings should be posted in compliance with the Open Meeting Law.

**Identifying your key constituents**

Your Communications Plan should begin with clear identification of your key constituent groups and should specify the protocols in communicating with those groups throughout the process. This will help to ensure a consistent message. An example of such an outline follows and those assigned with developing the plan should be careful to identify all key constituents from all the communities involved - both those supportive and non-supportive of regionalization. Leaving a key group out could lead to animosity not just toward the Regional Planning Board but also toward the regionalization process in general.

Local media is a key constituent group as they provide the Communications Sub-committee with a way to get information on the process out to residents on a wide-scale basis. In addition to traditional forms of media, websites can offer the Regional Planning Board an effective way to keep the public informed of the process. The Board may have its own website that can also be accessed as a link from the participating school districts’ websites or it may maintain a page on each of the district websites. It is important to keep the website current with an updated calendar of upcoming meetings and forums. Approved meeting minutes in PDF format may be posted and process outline or timeline may also be used to let residents know where the Board is in the process. Be sure to include the website address on all press releases and mention it at the conclusion of any presentations to encourage residents to make use of the website. Just as with other media and key constituents, an individual should be designated to maintain the website and monitor its information.

**Key Constituents**

Press

Local Newspapers

Local Public Access Cable TV

Local Radio Stations

Local Government

School Committees

Boards of Selectmen or other Town Leadership

Town Finance and Advisory Boards

State Government

MSBA

DESE

State Legislators

Taxpayers/Residents in both Town A and Town B

Other

School District Employees

Town Department Heads

Parents (PTO, Parent Advisory Groups, etc)

High School Students (if applicable)

Taxpayers

Residents

**Communication Protocols**

These protocols are established to provide consistency in all the Regional Planning Board’s communications throughout the process. While the Communications Sub-Committee remains responsible for developing the plan and carrying it out, the Chair or Vice Chair of the Planning Board are still considered the official representatives of the Board and would most likely be setting up meetings with other town officials. In some cases, town politics may dictate that another member of the Planning Board may be more effective in relating to certain town officials. Lastly, Planning Board members with good communication/presentation skills may be especially effective in both community forum presentations (discussed later) and on both local cable television and radio stations. As previously stated, consistency is important - once those point people are identified they should remain in those positions throughout the process.

The **point person** and **secondary point person** should be identified for each key constituent group for all matters relating to the Regional Planning Board and the regionalization process.

Additionally, in some cases, one or two individuals on the committee may be noted as having a **reporting** function to a constituent group either by virtue of the board or committee they represent or for a particular report or issue. Those identified as reporting committee members may provide ongoing updates to their respective committees/groups on the progress of the regionalization process or provide information as necessary, while the point and secondary point people remain responsible for setting up meetings with those chairs, requesting information, etc. The protocols/assignments developed by the Town A /Town B Regional Planning Board are provided as an example below:

**COMMUNICATION PROTOCOLS**

**Press - Point Person Chairperson *(from Town A)***

**- Secondary Vice-Chairperson *(from Town B)***

Newspapers

Local TV

Local Radio

**Local Government- noted below**

Town A School Committee

**Point Person Chairperson**

**Reporting Member of Planning Board representing**

**Town A School Committee**

Town B School Committee

**Point Person Chairperson**

**Reporting Member of Planning Board representing Town B School Committee**

Town A Board of Selectmen

Town A Advisory and Finance Board

**Point Person Chairperson**

Town B Board of Selectmen

Town B Finance Committee

**Point Person Chairperson**

**State Government - Point Person Chairperson**

MSBA

DESE

State Legislators

**Taxpayers/Residents**

**Town A and Town B- Point Person Chairperson/Vice Chair**

**Other:**

**School District Employees Point Person School Committee Reps.**

**Parents and Students Point Person Chairperson/Vice Chair**

**Secondary School Committee Reps.**

**Town A Police/ Fire Point Person Chairperson**

**Residents/Taxpayers Point Person Chairperson**

**Developing an effective message**

Once the Communications Protocols have been established, the Communications Sub-Committee can begin to plan the activities that will make up their communications effort. Each activity should present the Regional Planning Board with another opportunity to:

1. Educate the public of the important issues surrounding regionalization;
2. Inform the public regarding where the Board is in the “process”; and
3. Remind the public of how, when and where to participate and support the process.

At the start of the process, as the Regional Planning Board begins its study, the message will

focus more on points 2 and 3. However, as the study continues and the Board becomes more aware of the specific advantages and disadvantages of regionalization, the principle focus of the communication message will be on the issues. It is important, though, to always include information on where the Board is on the timeline for the process and what support will be needed from residents in the future. In cases where one benefit to regionalization may be MSBA funding for a future building project, community support must be maintained past the successful vote to regionalize, and one way to maintain momentum both during the regional planning process and beyond is to consistently remind residents of the entire process.

As an example, prior to regionalization in March of 2010, district officials from both towns succeeded in delivering to the community a clear message which stated that regionalization of the two districts was the best option to:

* Maintain and, where possible, improve current programs and services by joining resources of the two districts and eliminating some duplicative expenses;
* Capitalize on MSBA reimbursement for a high school building project; and
* Reduce the number of students who “choice out” of the Town C School District, ultimately saving money for the town.

While the Planning Board was successful in promoting the benefits of regionalization to the community, residents were left with the impression that the vote in March 2010, which approved the Regional Agreement, was all that was needed to move the process along. Parents who fully supported regionalization were not aware that their support would once again be needed to approve both funding for a feasibility study and a building project later on.

Using another approach, the Town B Education Alliance (a ballot action committee) developed a message that clearly explained to the residents of its community what their role was. Because one of the key benefits to regionalization was MSBA funding for a new model high school building, the group used the motto “Regionalize 3-2-1” in all their communications materials to remind residents that their support was needed to: 1) Vote to support the regional agreement, 2) Vote for a proposition 2 1/2 override to fund the operation of the region, and 3) Vote again sometime in the fall for a debt exclusion to fund the building project.

It is clear that to develop the community support for regionalization and have it continue to support future initiatives, a comprehensive communications effort is necessary. Key points to keep in mind are as follows:

1. The message should be positive –

* + Start with the strengths that each community brings to the region and explain the advantages of regionalization as they are identified.
  + Address challenges as such but keep personalities and past conflicts out of the discussion, if possible.
  + Remember that all concerns regarding the draft Agreement or regionalization in general should be considered by the Regional Planning Board and, in some cases, may actually serve to improve the final Regional Agreement. If those concerns are at least given serious consideration and a response, it may serve to build support for the effort.

2. The message should be simple and clear –

* + Remind residents of why regionalization makes sense, restating the benefits in terms that relate directly to them, for example:

*“With regionalization we can combine our resources so that we can afford to give our students a better education; as a result taxpayers in both communities will get more for their dollar.”*

*Or,*

*“As we are able to develop a better school system, "choice out" will decline, ultimately saving taxpayers money.”*

* Clearly explain of what happens if the communities choose to opt against regionalization. For example:

*“Without regionalization, our community will have to pay 100% of the cost of the new school - that equates to an average annual tax impact per household of $396 versus $98 after regionalization and support from the MSBA.”*

*Or,*

*“If we do not regionalize with this town, they will end up finding another community with which to regionalize. That equates to a loss of 30% in enrollment in our schools over the next four years, which means programs, and staff will have to be reduced."*

3. The message should repeatedly present and explain the timeline or steps to the regionalization process so that residents understand what has been done to date and what steps are to follow.

Another way to express the role of this suggested communications effort is that it must:

1. Continue to inform residents about the regionalization process;

2. Highlight its various advantages both to students and to taxpayers; and

3. Answer the questions that people may have on an ongoing basis rather than waiting for a critical vote. For example:

* + - What are the advantages and disadvantages of regionalization?
    - How will regionalization affect staffing?
    - How will it affect my taxes now and in the future?
    - What will the new region look like organizationally?
    - What are the budget issues facing the region at this time?
  + Is this a level funded budget with additional services vs. a level service budget that may cost more?

Regional Planning Board meetings are public meetings and will be covered by local papers from time to time depending on their frequency and what else may be going on in the communities. When the Board plans to meet with key individuals from the local or state level, a press advisory may be sent out in advance to encourage coverage. Periodic interview segments on the local radio stations or cable shows can provide listeners with brief updates and let them know when the next important meetings will be held and where. Local cable stations may also tape the meetings and forums (discussed below, airing them multiple times so that residents can follow along with the process).

While the media will be an important component to the communications plan, focus groups that are promoted as “community forums” have proven to be very effective especially when conducted as described in the following section.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Hold Focus Group Meetings (1st Series)**

Focus Group Meetings or Community Forums are an effective way to communicate the Regional Planning Board’s message to the communities, solicit comments and concerns and begin to develop support for the regionalization effort. The community forums should be scheduled at different times throughout the process and the Regional Planning Board should consider the information gathered in the meetings as they continue to develop their final recommendation and prepare for town meetings.

In the beginning, the Communications Sub-Committee should focus on informing the public of the Regional Planning Process. Shortly after the Regional Planning Board is formed, a press release can be sent to local media introducing members of the Board and their affiliations and backgrounds. The release should also include a clear and simple explanation of the process and note upcoming dates. Below is an excerpt from an example of a press release explaining the planning process:

**SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE**

…The Town Moderators in the towns of Town C and Town D appointed these individuals to the Regional Planning Board. The Board of six will be working over the next year on identifying the issues surrounding regionalization. At the conclusion of their study, they will be making their recommendation to the residents at both town meetings sometime next year. Regional Planning Board Chairperson, Mrs. Smith, explained the regional planning process and stressed that there will be many opportunities for community input along the way.

According to Mrs. Smith, the Board will be spending the first few months collecting fiscal and enrollment data to determine the advantages and challenges of regionalization. They will have initial meetings with individuals from both school departments, local officials, as well as, state officials from DESE and MSBA as they prepare a report on their preliminary findings.

Those preliminary findings will then be presented to residents of both communities in a series of public forums, which will allow for both questions and input from those in attendance. The input gathered at those forums will then be considered by the Regional Planning Board as it considers all the issues. If as a result of its findings and the input provided at public forums, the Regional Planning Board recommends that a regional school district be established, the Board will begin to develop a draft Regional Agreement.

Well in advance of the annual town meetings, a second series of public forums will be held to inform the public of the Planning Board’s findings, final recommendation and the elements of the draft Regional Agreement. Once the Board has finalized the Agreement with input from the second series of community forums, it will be presented to the Boards of Selectmen, School Committees and Finance Boards for their consideration and in advance of the town meetings.

“It is our hope that the Regional Planning Process will be a collaborative effort within both communities and that residents will have the opportunity to be informed and provide their input all along the way,” explained Mrs. Smith. “Our goal is to do what is best for the children and with everyone’s help we can ensure that our final decision will be what is best not just for now but for years to come.” ….

Once the Planning Board has collected and studied the data, the first series of focus group meetings, or **Community Forums** should be held to gather input from residents. Again, a press release to all media can be sent to announce the dates, times and locations of the forums. Brief interviews may be scheduled for both local radio and cable television stations to announce the series of forums, and the forums may be taped and aired at various times. Locations and times should be set to attract diverse groups within the populations. For example, an early afternoon forum may be held at the local Council on Aging for the benefit of the elderly in town and another right after a PTO meeting in the auditorium of a local school for the benefit of parents with school-age children. The schedule of forums should be posted on the website if available. In the case of the Town A /Town B Regional Planning Board, a Letter to the Editor was also used to explain the purpose of the community forums and encourage attendance. An excerpt follows:

**SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

…The Regionalization Planning Board has been meeting on almost a weekly basis since July 23rd and will continue to work in the upcoming months to make a recommendation on regionalization. Throughout the process, the Board has consulted with Department of Elementary/Secondary Education, the Massachusetts School Building Authority, and the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools, in addition to meeting with the Boards of Selectmen, Advisory and Finance Boards and School Committees of both towns. We have reviewed Regional Agreements from across the state and enrollment and community statistics for years going forward.

Soon, the Regional Planning Board will hold a series of forums in both Town B and Town A to explain to residents all that we’ve have learned to date and to gather their input. This will give residents of both towns the opportunity to learn the facts, to ask questions, and to have their voices heard. These community forums will be held in a variety of locations in both towns and their scheduled dates and times will be publicized well in advance.

We urge residents of both towns to attend these forums so that the Regional Planning Board can consider their input in determining whether regionalization is right for both towns.  The forums will allow residents to become more informed about the possibility of regionalization apart from what they may have read in local papers or heard “around town.”

When a final recommendation is made later this spring, it is our hope that residents of both towns, after attending these forums, will be able to make a well informed decision about whether regionalization is the right choice for each town, the taxpayers, and the future education of students.

Sincerely, The Regional School District Planning Board

While a designated member(s) of the Planning Board may be responsible for presenting the initial findings in a Power Point presentation at these forums, it is best to have a respected individual from outside the communities to act as moderator during the public input section. If necessary, representatives from MARS, DESE and/or MSBA may be invited to serve as panel members to address questions from residents.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Below is an example of the Community Forum Schedule and the Forum Agenda developed by the Town A/ Town B Regional Planning Board.* COMMUNITY FORUM SCHEDULE** Day | **Date** | **Time** | **Location** | **Speakers** |
| Mon. | 3/15 | 5:30 pm | Town B Town Hall | Town B BOS, Fin Com, & School Comm |
| Wed. | 3/17 | 5:30 pm | Town A Town Hall | Town A BOS, A&F, & School Comm |
| **Mon.** | **3/22** | **4:00 pm** | **Town A High School** | **TOWN FORUM**  **Moderator: Director of Urban Initiative @ UMass Dartmouth**  **MSBA ; DESE to be present** |
|  |  | **7:00 pm** | **Town A High School** | **TOWN FORUM**  **Moderator: Director of Urban Initiative @ UMass Dartmouth**  **MSBA; DESE to be present** |
| **Wed.** | **3/24** | **1:00 pm** | **Council on Aging** | **TOWN FORUM**  **Exec. Dir. of MARS; MSBA Representation to be present** |
|  |  | **7:00 pm** | **Town A High School** | **TOWN FORUM**  **Exec. Dir. of MARS; MSBA Representation to be present** |
| **Thurs.** | **3/25** | **7:00 pm** | **Town B Community School** | **TOWN FORUM**  **Exec. Dir. of MARS; MSBA Representation to be present** |
| **Mon.** | **3/29** | **7:00 pm** | **Town B Middle School** | **TOWN FORUM**  **Exec. Dir. of MARS; MSBA Representation to be present** |
| Mon. | 5/17 |  | Town A High School | ANNUAL TOWN MEETING |
| Mon. | 6/7 |  | Town B Middle School | ANNUAL TOWN MEETING |

**Steps to Conducting Community Forums/Focus Groups**

To summarize, the following are key steps in planning your community forums/focus groups:

* Once your Communications Sub-Committee has crafted the Power Point presentation, the Regional Planning Board must decide who should be responsible for presenting the information to residents. While all/most members of the Regional Planning Board should attend, one or two members with good communication skills should be charged with leading the presentation at all the forums as the information should remain as consistent as possible. Other Regional Planning Board members as well as representatives from DESE and MSBA should be present to address questions and concerns raised by audience members at the conclusion of the presentation.
* In the first series of meetings, it is helpful to invite a respected individual from outside the communities to act as moderator/chair for the meeting.
* The Regional Planning Board should develop the agenda. An example is provided below.

**PROPOSED TOWN FORUM AGENDA**

**WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS 5 MIN MODERATOR**

**REGIONAL PLANNING BOARD PLANNING**

**PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS 20 MIN BOARD MEMBER**

**MSBA MODEL SCHOOL VIDEO 7 MIN MSBA REP**

**MSBA MODEL SCHOOL PROGRAM**

**AND LOCAL OFFER 5 MIN MSBA REP**

**LOCAL WRAP UP 10 MIN PLANNING**

**BOARD**

**COMMENTS/Q &A 30-40 MIN MODERATOR**

**TOURS OF TOWN A HIGH SCHOOL (where applicable)**

* The first series of forums/focus groups should be held early on in the regional planning process, before the Regional Planning Board has reached a definitive recommendation on whether or not to regionalize, but after some significant research has been to determine the positives and negatives, and well before the Town Meeting votes.
* The forums should be scheduled at multiple locations in all the communities that are considering regionalization. Different times should be considered to encourage attendance from all groups of residents.
* Within the first series of forums/focus groups, it is important that the Regional Planning Board provide multiple opportunities for the community to participate. By holding multiple forums at different times and locations, the residents will have been given ample opportunity to learn about and participate in the process. These forums will not only serve to build support for the regionalization process but will also provide the Regional Planning Board with information regarding the views of those opposed to regionalization as they may attend these meetings to present their views. With this information, the Planning Board can work to address those issues in the next series of forums as they continue to develop support for the process.

Clearly focus groups or community forums play an important role throughout the communications plan in presenting the message from the Regional Planning Board, gathering community feedback and building community support for regionalization. To keep the Regional Planning Board on track, it may be helpful to lay-out all the communications activities in a timeline as described below.

**Regional School District Planning Board**

**TIMETABLE**

**STEP TIMEFRAME**

1. Finalize Assessment Methodology by 02/24

2. Determine estimated impact of Regionalization based on by 02/24

Assessment Method and establish Draft Budget for Region yr 10/11

3. Finalize language on remaining components of Regional Agreement by 3/10

•Transition

•Land/Building

•Assessment Methodology Language

4. Meet with DESE to review final draft to be sent to Boards of Selectmen by 3/10

5. Present draft to Boards of Selectmen for two week review by 3/17

6. Develop presentation of recent draft Agreement by 3/18

7. Community Forums 3/22 - 3/29

8. Update revise/draft with input from Town Boards and Forums by 4/16

9. Present Final Recommendation to Boards of Selectmen by 4/16

10. Community Votes at Town Meetings by Written Ballot May/June

Just as the Regional Planning Board may develop a process outline or timeline to keep them on track with the steps in the Regional Planning Process, the Communications Sub-Committee may develop a timeline for their activities that should coincide with the ongoing process. Below you will find a partial Process Timetable and Meeting Schedule used by a Regional School District Planning Board. Note how the Meeting Schedule below outlines specific communications activities to support the ongoing process.

**Town A/Town B Regional School District Planning Board**

**MEETING SCHEDULE**

**Thurs. Jan. 14 6:30 pm Board Meeting Town B Middle School**

Review of Draft Section 1/Discussion of Non-Financial Sections

**Wed. Jan. 20 6:30 pm Board Meeting Town A Elementary School**

Review of Non-Financial Sections (w/DESE)

Discussion on Assessment Model/Budget

Review/Update Process Chart/Meeting Schedule

**Wed. Jan. 27 6:30 pm Board Meeting Town A Elementary School**

Finalize Non-Financial Sections

Review Assessment Model/Budget (w/DESE)

Begin work on proposal/presentation

**Sat. Jan. 30 10-4 Board Meeting (working session) Town B Middle School**

**Wed. Feb. 3 6:30 pm Board Meeting Town B Middle School**

Finalize Proposal/Draft Agreement (w/DESE)

Discuss Transition/Long Range Plan/Impact

Wed. Feb. 10 MEETING CANCELLED DUE TO STORM

Week of Feb. 15th Winter Vacation

**Wed. Feb. 24 6:30 pm Communications Meeting Town A Elementary School**

Begin with TV, Radio (Town B and Town A)

Overview of process, key components

Announce schedule of community focus groups

**Wed. Mar. 3 6:30 pm Board Meeting Town B Middle School**

Finalize Draft Agreement Language/Revise Process Outline

**Wed. Mar. 10 6:30 pm Board Meeting Town A Elementary School**

Review Final Draft Agreement with DESE

Develop Long Range Plan

Presentation and Schedule for Focus Groups to be held 3/15-26

**Thurs. Mar. 11 6:30 pm Board Meeting Town B Middle School**

Present Draft Agreement to Boards of Selectmen for Review

Finalize Long Range Plan, Presentation, and

Schedule for Focus Groups to be held 3/15-26

**Mar. 22-29 Town Forums TBD**

**Week of 4/5 Board Meeting TBD Town A Elementary School**

Review feedback from Boards and Forums/Develop final recommendation with approval from DESE

**Week of 4/11 Meet with Boards of Selectmen TBD**

To present final recommendation of Agreement for vote

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 2 - Regional Planning Committee and Regional Planning Board**

* 1. **Make Recommendation to Regionalize (Yes or No)**

A recommendation by the Regional Planning Board to continue on the path of regionalization or not should be based on the following:

* Review of the feedback gathered in the first series of forums;
* Careful study of regionalization , including study of what other districts within the state have done ;
* Analysis of all the pros and cons of regionalization to each community involved - including additional costs and/or savings to the average taxpayer; and
* On-going discussions with DESE regarding the elements of a proposed or revised Regional Agreement and what options exist to tailor your agreement to the need of your communities.

It is important that residents feel comfortable that the final recommendation was made only after careful consideration of all the issues. Should the Planning Board’s recommendation be to regionalize, a public meeting should be scheduled at which time the Board takes a vote on going forward and explains the reasons why. The information presented in subsequent focus groups/community forums and meetings should outline key elements of the proposed Agreement and clearly explain the reasons for its recommendation. The Chair must inform DESE and the Boards of Selectmen of the vote of the Planning Board.

If, after reviewing all the information gathered, the Regional Planning Board determines that going forward with regionalization efforts is not in the best interest of one or more of the communities involved, they must schedule a public meeting during which they share their findings and their recommendation to not go forward. It is important to prepare a public statement that can then be read at the meeting and then published. The Board then needs to vote to return any unspent monies to the towns and/or DESE and then to disband. The Chair must inform DESE of the actions taken.

If the Planning Board votes to pursue regionalization, move on to the next step.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 3 - Develop Regional Agreement and Long Range Plan**

* + - 1. **Contact DESE and Request Reorganization Needs Conference**

Now that the Regional Planning Board has voted to move forward in the regionalization process, it is time to compile all of the information that you have collected and gleaned from your research and public forums and begin to develop the Long Range Plan for your district.

Regional School District Regulations 603 CMR 41.02 requires that the Regional Planning Board schedule a Reorganization Needs Conference with DESE as part of the regional approval process. In preparation for the Reorganization Needs Conference, the Regional Planning Board should begin to develop its Long Range Educational and Structural Plan. The components of this plan as required by DESE are included in Appendix **I**.

As part of the discussion at the needs conference, it important that the Regional Planning Board Chair or a designated Superintendent outline the plan for the district. The important components would include:

* The type of regional school district under consideration;
* The grade range;
* The timeframe for local votes;
* Transition plans;
* Enrollment projections;
* School Facility plans and usage; and
* Organizational details for administration and school committee.

It is important to contact DESE early in the process. DESE regulations (603 CMR 41.03) outlines the procedure and timeline for obtaining the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education approve of your regional agreement. As part of the Reorganization Needs Conference, the Regional Planning Board must outline its timeline for town meeting votes. It is critical that DESE is informed of your schedule so that the agreement documents may be reviewed thoroughly and thoughtfully by DESE staff and appropriate feedback provided to the committee. Sufficient time must be allotted in the process to allow for any necessary revisions prior to the final submission to the member towns for consideration. It is important to remember that all local and state approvals of a new or amended regional school district agreement must occur no later than the December 31 preceding the July 1 start date of the new or revised district (603 CMR 41.03).

Alternatively, the regional agreement may provide for a period of transition that would allow the new Regional School District to function as a non operating district but have the power to hire staff, enter into contracts, and take such other actions as are needed to prepare for an orderly transition. During this time, the member school committees continue to exist to manage the operational needs of the individual districts. The transition period may extend from the date of approval of the Regional Agreement until the next July 1, if the agreement is approved prior to December 31, or the transition may continue for an additional fiscal year. At the end of the transition planning period, responsibility for the oversight and operation of the schools shall transfer to the regional school committee.

On-going contact with Department staff throughout the planning phase and holding of the Reorganization Needs Conference, and Department review of the proposed Agreement provides confidence that the timelines will be met and the Agreement language will comply with all applicable laws and regulations, prior to voter approval. Regular conversations with DESE will help ensure that the language of the agreement will meet your local needs as well as meet all provisions of law and regulations. This contact will ensure that the agreement as presented to town meeting may also be recommended to the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education for approval.

To schedule the Reorganization Needs Conference, you will need to contact:

***Regional Schools Liaison***

Office of School Governance & Facility Support

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

75 Pleasant Street

Malden, MA 02148-4906

781-338-6520

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 3 - Develop Regional Agreement and Long Range Plan**

* + - 1. **Develop the Draft Regional Agreement**

While the Regional Agreement represents the “rudder” that will guide the district, writing the agreement should not be a daunting task. The agreement should provide direction to the district moving forward and address the issues voiced during the public forums and raised throughout your study. Much of the content of the agreement is controlled by statutory requirements (MGL Chapter 71, Section 14B). However, within the requirements are options that allow the District to tailor the Regional Agreement to address its issues and concerns.

The discussions and writing of the long range plan may help in identifying the issues important to the district and provide direction on how to reflect those issues and concerns in the regional agreement language. For example, if a town voiced fears that its elementary school would close, the Regional Agreement could include specific language describing the process that would be used when considering the closing of a school and who would have a say in the decision. We suggest that once the issues have been discussed and agreements reached regarding the content of the agreement, the Regional Planning Board should seek legal advice as well as additional guidance from a consultant or DESE to begin writing the Regional Agreement.

This manual provides a model of a Regional Agreement in Appendix **H1** and a sample of a recently approved Regional Agreement in Appendix **H2**. The samples are excellent guides but it is important to identify specific issues needed to address the uniqueness that will set the new district apart from other current districts. Copies of all Regional Agreements are on file at DESE and can be relied upon as helpful templates.

As the Board begins preparing drafts of both the Long Range Educational and Structural Plan and the Regional Agreement, copies should be forwarded to DESE for its review and consideration. The Board should address any concerns presented by DESE officials and incorporate suggestions into the final draft **before** the next series of presentations and meetings with local officials.

At this time, let's take a closer look at how to write the Regional Agreement. Chapter 71, Section 14B outlines the required components. In addition, we offer some topic areas that have been addressed by past Planning Boards and include a summary of important components developed by DESE in Appendix **B**.

Standard components:

1. Listing of member towns
2. Type or model of Regional District (grade configuration) (academic or vocational);
3. The town or towns in which the regional district school(s) are located;
4. The number, composition, method of selection of the school committee;
5. The terms of office of the school committee;
6. Voting procedures for school committee members (One person/One Vote);
7. Filling vacancies on the school committee;
8. Electing officers on the school committee;
9. Powers of the school committee and of the transition school committee;
10. The detailed procedure for the preparation and adoption of an annual budget;
11. Definition of capital and operating costs;
12. Method of apportionment of costs and timeline for payment;
13. Method for incurring debt;
14. Method of amending and terminating the Regional Agreement;
15. Method to withdraw from the region or to admit a new member;
16. Method by which the Regional District will provide transportation; and
17. Procedures that govern the transition period.

Other issues that may be address:

1. Whether students will be served in their local school;
2. Under what conditions may students be served in other than their local school, i.e. emergencies;
   1. Whether the district will accept students from member towns attending partner schools;
3. A procedure to close a school building, including required votes;
4. Lease of school facilities not owned by the district;
5. Capital maintenance plans;
6. How to handle existing indebtedness;
7. Periodic review of regional agreement; and
8. Disposition of assets upon termination or withdrawal of a member.

Let's take a more detailed look at *some* of the key components of the Regional Agreement:

**Transition Period:**

For a new regional school district or one that is expanding its grade configuration, it is imperative that the Regional Planning Board address the concept of a “Transition Period” in the new regional school district agreement. The Transition Period will extend from the date of voter approval of the Regional Agreement (and subsequent approval by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education) and the date of the beginning of the first year of actual operation for the region. The transition period may extend for six months to a year or even a year and one half. The Transition period ends on a June 30 prior to the July 1 of the first “operational” fiscal year.

During the entire “transition” period there will be as many school committees in operation as there are individual member districts, plus the new Regional School Committee. Individual member districts will maintain local school committees that manage the local district affairs, as they always have. A new Regional School Committee will also be functioning during the Transition Period to manage the affairs of the new Regional District.

**School Committees:**

The Regional Agreement must address the following matters regarding the Regional School Committee:

1. Composition of the Regional School Committee

The Regional Agreement must address the number of school committee representatives and how the Regional School Committee members will be appointed or elected. Elected officials must meet the requirements of the One Person/One Vote ruling. Information on the various methods that may be employed to select school committee representation may be found in MGL Chapter 71, Section 14E. DESE staff can help the Planning Board decide which option may work the best for the new region.

Often, Regional Agreements provide for an “interim committee” to serve until such time as the permanent members of the school committee are selected/elected. The interim committee members may be appointed members from the existing member committees. Appointments to school committee positions need not be proportionate to the population of the member towns – only elected members. An interim Regional School Committee has full power and authority until such time as the permanent committee is elected in accordance with the terms of the regional agreement.

The Regional Agreement should provide for staggered terms for the initially elected Regional School Committee. Some Regional Agreements provide that the person(s) receiving the highest number of votes receive the three year term of office, the person(s) receiving the second highest number of votes receiving the two year term, and so on. Other Boards have candidates identify in advance if they are running for a three-year, two-year or one-year term on the school committee. Each Board needs to make its own decision regarding this matter.

It is important to note that the Regional School Committee elected or appointed during the transition period has the power of all school committees but is governed by any limitations included in the terms of the regional school district agreement.

If a transition period is planned, the Regional Agreement should also address how the Regional School Committee (whether through permanent election or interim appointment) will interact with the existing member school committee.

1. Quorum and Required Votes

The Regional Agreement will include a determination of when a quorum exists and is tied to having a majority of the total membership present. There may also be a stipulation that, in addition to having a majority present, each member community will have some number of members present. Some school committee votes, such as a budget approval, are stipulated in statute; others such as the amendment or termination of the agreement are determined by the regional school district language.

1. Powers and Duties of the Regional Committees (MGL Chap. 71, Sec. 16 and 16A)

The Regional Agreement will spell out specific duties and powers of the Transitional Regional School Committee and the member town School Committees during the transition period. In essence, the Agreement will allocate to the Regional School Committee all powers that any School Committee would possess under statute and regulations which will empower and enable the Regional Committee to plan, prepare, and operate the new school district. Some of the powers/duties of the Regional Committee are outlined in MGL Chap. 71, Sec. 16 and 16A.

1. Relationship Between School Committees during the Transition Period

The Regional Agreement should detail the relationship and interaction of the existing town school committees with the Regional School Committee and where powers may overlap. The responsibilities and powers of the local school committees during the transition should be addressed in the Regional Agreement. The new Regional School Committee and local school committees should work closely together during the transition. It is important to emphasize in the Regional Agreement that the local school committee should not make any long term decisions during the Transition Period that would commit the new Regional District. Some of the issues that should be addressed include:

a. Local school committees should not make any decision that would change the district’s school choice status; and

b. Local school committees should not approve any long term expenditure that would commit the new Region in the future.

During the Transitional Period, the Regional Committee may need to appoint “interim” positions that will serve beyond the term of the Transition Period (for example, an Interim Superintendent or a treasurer) to insure continuity of operations throughout the entire period. The Region may also need to appoint Legal Counsel or engage consultants.

These are the types of decisions that could have long-term financial and educational impact on the “Operational Region” so they ought to have input from the Regional Committee. The critical piece is that clear lines of communication and action are established in order to avoid overstepping of bounds.

1. Termination of the Transitional Regional Committee

The Transition Regional Committee’s duration will be defined in the Regional Agreement.

**Preparation of the Annual Budget**

The process by which a Regional School Committee prepares its annual budget is outlined in Chapter 71, Section 16B and Regional School District Regulations (603 CMR 41.05). A summary sheet of important steps, timelines and votes may also be found on the DESE website at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/regional/> in a document called *Developing the Regional Budget*. Chapter 71, Section 38n requires that the school committee of each city, town or regional school district shall hold a public hearing on its proposed annual budget not less than *seven days* after publication of a notice thereof in a newspaper having general circulation in such city, town or district. <http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/71-38n.htm>

A Regional Planning Board should carefully review the statute, regulations and supplemental information provided by DESE before addressing this topic in the Regional Agreement. This is one area that does not allow for much discretion or flexibility on the part of the Regional Planning Board. The language of Chapter 71, Section 16B provides specific requirements relative to the timeline, required vote and budget approval process. The budget should clearly define each separate revenue source. Grant, revolving and trust funds should not be included in the budget, but should be provided to the member municipalities for informational purposes.

The budget must specify whether members' assessments are calculated pursuant to the statutory assessment method or the alternative/agreement assessment method; and must specify the total amounts to be assessed to the members for the support of the budget.

Two methodologies are available to regional school districts for calculating assessments to member municipalities. The methodologies are defined in 603 CMR 41.01 and in [*Guidance for Regional School Districts*](http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/regional/guidance.docx).

**Assessment Methodologies:**

The Regional Agreement must outline a process for apportioning capital, operating and transportation costs. Existing regional school districts use varying methodologies but most are based on apportioning costs proportional to student enrollment in the district from each member town. The method may be the same or different for apportioning all three types of costs. The Regional Planning Board should careful consider the methodology that best meets the needs of the members towns and describe the methodology in the regional agreement to provide clear direction on how various types of costs will be shared in the operating region.

The Chapter 70 state aid formula imposes a minimum level of educational spending on each district and on each town in Massachusetts. In order for towns in regional districts to meet the Chapter 70 spending requirement, Regional Regulations have outlined two methodologies available to Regional School Districts for calculating assessments to member towns. In any given year, the Regional School Committee may prepare its member town assessments based on one of the methodologies outlined below and in regulation. The methodologies defined in 603 CMR 41.02 and as follows only relate to the apportionment of operating costs that are defined in the Chapter 70 statute. All other costs that are required to meet the school committee budget that exceed the statutory requirement or are outside of the statutory requirement (transportation, capital) are apportioned according to the methodology outlined in the regional school district agreement. The methodologies defined in regulation are as follows:

Statutory Assessment Method. The calculation of members' assessments pursuant to the provisions of M.G.L. c.70, § 6. Each such assessment shall be the sum of the following amounts: (a) the member's required local contribution to the regional school district as determined by the Commissioner; (b) the member's share of that portion of the regional school district's net school spending, as defined by M.G.L. c.70, § 2, that exceeds the total required local contribution for all members, this share to be allocated pursuant to the assessment provisions of the regional agreement; and (c) the member's share of costs for transportation, capital project debt service, other capital costs, and all other expenditures not included in the regional school district's net school spending, this share to be allocated pursuant to the assessment provisions of the regional agreement.

Alternative Assessment Method. The calculation of members' assessments pursuant to the local option provided in the fourth paragraph of M.G.L. c.71, § 16B. Each such assessment shall be the sum of the following amounts: (a) the member's share of the regional school district's net school spending, as defined by M.G.L. c.70, § 2; and (b) the member's share of costs for transportation, capital project debt service, other capital costs, and all other expenditures not included in the regional school district's net school spending; both such shares to be allocated pursuant to the assessment provisions of the regional agreement.

Detailed information on these two methodologies is included in Appendix H and may be found on the DESE website at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/regional/> in a document called *Preparing Member Assessments: Guidance for Regional School Districts*.

It may become apparent during the Regional Planning Board’s discussions around the financial impact of regionalizing, that some member communities will benefit under a regional structure, but that others may find that regionalization will initially cost the local community more. This is largely associated with differences in "Excess of Net School Spending” levels that existed prior to the formation of the Region. Unless addressed in the Regional Agreement, this can act as a "disincentive" for those communities. It is very important that this matter be discussed and amenable resolutions reached.

For example, in Ayer Shirley, this was addressed and articulated in the Regional Agreement [see Appendix I] and became known as the "hold harmless" language. Using the “statutory method” for computing member assessments, Shirley's projected initial FY12 assessment would have been approximately $450,000 more than its FY11 budget level. This would have diminished support for regionalization.

The "hold harmless" principle states that no member would pay more in the first year of the Region than it did the prior year as a local district (tempered by any small general increase in funding level). Then for the next five years of regional assessments, the district which is “underpaying” will increase its share by 20% of the difference until appropriate parity is reached. There are certainly other methods or options that may work better in other scenarios, but if there is disparity, this issue will need to be resolved.

**Amendments to Regional Agreements: Withdrawal, Termination, Addition of New Members**

The agreement must address how a member town may withdraw from the Regional Agreement, how new towns may be added and how amendments are to be approved. All amendments to the agreement must be approved by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. You may wish to address in your agreement, the required local votes to amend the agreement, the timeline for submitting agreements for approval by the Regional School Committee and the member towns, whether amendments may be submitted by local petition, the desired effective date of any amendment and any additional information that may be desired.

**School Building Issues and Leasing of town owned buildings to the Region**

During the discussion of regionalization, there should be a clear understanding of how existing school buildings will be used, whether new buildings will be needed or whether there will be a need to close a school building. The Regional Agreement should address what school facilities will be needed to support the students in the new region. The Agreement should include a provision that would address ownership of all school buildings and as needed, provide that school buildings owned by individual towns will be leased to the Regional School District.

**Forwarding Agreement to DESE for Review**

The Regional Planning Board should forward drafts of the Agreement for DESE review early in the process. This procedure will avoid any misunderstandings, confusion or errors during the development process. Make sure you also notify DESE of the timeline for your town meeting votes. After each draft is completed, public hearings/forums should be held to elicit comment and help identify any other important issues. The Planning Board must keep DESE apprised of any and all edits made after the document is presented in public forums or hearings and before it is presented again in its revised form. As needed, a formal meeting with DESE may be scheduled to gather its feedback on the draft documents.

Once all necessary changes have been made, based on your public forums and feedback from DESE, the Regional Planning Board should take a formal vote on the final Regional Agreement

The final agreement should be forwarded to DESE for legal review to ensure that the language complies with Massachusetts General Laws. A review by DESE of the final language is critical in order to provide assurance that the document presented for voter approval at town meeting with be accepted by DESE and approved by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Board should address any concerns presented by DESE officials and suggestions for edits should be incorporated into the final draft before the next series of presentations and meetings with local officials.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 3 - Develop Regional Agreement and Long Range Plan**

* + - 1. **Begin Writing Long Range Educational and Structural Plan**

As previously noted, one of the responsibilities of the Regional Planning Board is to request a Reorganization Needs Conference with DESE. The application for such conference requires the Board to submit a **Long Range Educational and Structural Plan** (603 CMR 41.02). Much of the data you gathered in your early discussions and after the formation of the Planning Board will be used to complete this Plan. We have provided a sample plan that was recently developed by the state's newest district: Ayer Shirley. It can be found in Appendix **L**. It is not recommended that you use this sample as a boilerplate document, but rather, to guide you as you develop your own Plan, as each district is unique. It is recommended that you work with DESE as you develop the Plan to insure that what you are creating is what the Department will approve. Appendix B contains an excellent document that can also assist you in this process. The document was prepared by DESE and is titled: "Steps to Forming a Regional School District." The basic components of the Long Range Educational and Structural Plan are as follows:

**A. Educational strategies and programs**. Explain how the following programs are currently offered and how, or whether, these programs will be changed or enhanced under a new expanded or enlarged district.

1. Academic curricular offerings;
2. Collaborative programs and initiatives with neighboring districts;
3. At risk students and low incidence populations;
4. Extra-curricular offerings;
5. Professional development opportunities;
6. Vocational education; and
7. Other programs such as early childhood education, twelve-month school year, extended school day, restructuring, day care, adult programs, etc.

**B. Organizational characteristics of the proposed district:**

1. Submit student enrollments projected for a minimum of five years;
2. Identify proposed grade structure;
3. Provide evidence of compatibility of member towns that may enhance and sustain the merger;
4. Provide evidence that contiguous towns/school committees have been notified of a regionalization study, as applicable;
5. Provide information on pertinent geographic and physical characteristics; and
6. Provide other locally derived data to support the merger.

**C. Administrative enhancements:**

1. Provide present and future organizational chart;
2. Address transportation plans and economies;
3. Address purchasing and bidding strategies;
4. Provide an inventory of all educational facilities under the jurisdiction of the various school committees, current and proposed;
5. Explain how all school buildings will be utilized; and
6. Describe long range school construction plans.

**D. Procedural:**

All requisite approvals, including the Commissioner's approval, shall be obtained no later than the preceding December 31st. The authorizing votes may provide for the deferral of the effective date of a new regional district or the admission or withdrawal of members until July 1 of a subsequent fiscal year.

**E. Additional information:**

1. Describe the timetable for town meeting presentations and votes; and

2. Expected date of school district reorganization.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 4 - Submission of Proposed Regional Agreement for Public Review**

* 1. **Conduct Focus Groups/Public Forums (2nd Series)**

When you feel you have completed the second draft of the Regional Agreement, it is ready to present to the public for further discussion and input. You should prepare another Power Point presentation. Be sure that this presentation:

1. Clearly presents the major comments/ideas/concerns that were brought up in the first series of forums and explains how they were addressed in the second draft Agreement;
2. Identifies and explains in simple terms the components of the draft Agreement including the assessment formula; and
3. Reminds the public of the process and the steps to follow.

In addition to the presentation, this second series of forums provides another opportunity for public input. A moderator may or may not be needed. The Regional Planning Board should decide this. Key town officials, both supportive and not supportive of regionalization should be personally invited to attend at least one of these forums since their concerns will be addressed.

Once again, a press release to all media should be sent to announce the dates, times and locations of the forums. As with the first series, brief interviews may be scheduled for both local radio and cable television stations to announce the series of forums, and the forums may be taped by local cable stations and aired at various times. The schedule of forums should be posted on the website if available.

It is important to keep communication positive and, whenever possible, continue to foster a collaborative process. An excerpt from a sample Letter to the Editor submitted by a Regional Planning Board immediately following their second series of forums can be found below. The letter was intended in part to bring various groups together to work on a final Agreement that would work best for both communities.

**LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Town A School Committee for hosting the Regional Planning Board at its meeting on April 14th. The School Committee Chairperson did an outstanding job in moderating the meeting to ensure that all views were presented and healthy, productive debate could take place. We also appreciate the attendance of the Board of Selectmen, members of the Advisory and Finance Board, representatives of the Town A Teachers Association and the general public.

As we stated in our Town Forums last month, the issue of whether Town A and Town B should regionalize the high school is undoubtedly one of the most important issues facing our community. It affects all residents and while the debate over the issue may have become emotional at times during the meeting, I hope that after that discussion, we have come to a point in the process where we can move into a new phase of cooperation since it is clear that all of us, regardless of our viewpoint, have the best interest of the students at heart….

…Both the School Department Officials and members of the School Committee have the right to voice their opinions regarding regionalization.  It is understandable and even expected that members of any board/community would not approach every issue with the same opinion or mindset.  It is through open communication, compromise and collaboration that we are able to achieve the best results….

…In our presentation, we attempted to address much of the issues highlighted.  As far as those that remain, it is my hope that the Regional Planning Board, School Officials, State Officials and Town Officials can come to the table in the spirit of cooperation; roll up our sleeves, and work to develop the best agreement for both communities not just for the present but also well into the future…

We still have some work to do. I hope that residents of both Town A and Town B will take the time to review and understand our final recommendation and Agreement when completed. At that point, they can then make the ultimate decision with their respective votes sometime in the near future.

Sincerely,

Chairperson

Regional School District Planning Board

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 4 - Submission of Proposed Regional Agreement for Public Review**

* 1. **Planning Board Evaluates Feedback from Focus Groups**

**Discusses Feedback**

**Makes Appropriate Changes**

A Regional Planning Board will confront many issues in developing its Regional Agreement. As already noted, there are articles and sub-sections that will reflect statute, some will be of a “boiler plate” design, and others will require much discussion and revision because they will reflect the special circumstances that are often found in communities. Each community will likely bring a different point of view to the issues discussed. Ultimately, the power of compromise and negotiations will have great significance toward reaching an acceptable document that will be ready for the electorate of all communities involved to approve.

Each community will bring specific and important issues to the table. These usually involve such topics as use of facilities, past and future debt, school closings, school usage, lease agreements, capital/facility improvements, and assessments. It is common then that the Planning Board will deal with many practices that are unique and specific to how each community handled them when they operated as their own local educational agency. Regardless of the issue, however, making the final adjustments and reaching consensus requires much effort and good faith. In the end, the Regional Agreement will be a stronger document because of the time the Board spends resolving questions and concerns.

The input and discussion from the second series of focus groups, along with continued discussions and meetings with DESE officials, will help the Regional Planning Board to finalize the Regional Agreement.

To ensure the passage of the new Regional Agreement the Regional Planning Board should follow a process that includes some or all of the steps outlined below.

1. All discussions regarding specific and unique circumstances should be held at open meetings. There should be true transparency to the process with no hint that decisions were reached behind closed doors;
2. Communicate the status of the difficult issues as much as possible with important stakeholders. This should include current School Committees, town governmental agencies or departments, and any affected party that might hold this issue as an important “deal breaker;”
3. Maintain constant communication with DESE before any resolution to a unique situation is included in the Agreement. The Commissioner of Education, by statute, must approve the Agreement and the DESE legal staff will have final say on the Agreement prior to submission to the Commissioner;

1. Have Legal Counsel continually review any article that you believe may create controversy. Be on the safe side so that your solution does not create other issues;
2. Hold public hearings along the way. The more feedback you receive the better. Do not forget to include Boards of Selectmen and Boards of Finance; and
3. Once you have finished your work, hold more hearings to report out your final document. Receiving approval from the School Committees involved will also be necessary.

Remember that the Agreement is what binds the region. Many agreements are modified and revised over time. Occasionally circumstances change and the revisions provide for a more fluid operation of the district. Additionally, state statutes might impact Agreements, especially in the financial sections. But it is important to note, especially during the development stage, that no Agreement is ever final. Building in flexibility and the willingness to make changes as necessary will help with deliberations.

This final draft will require:

1. Careful consideration of the input gathered during the first and second series of focus groups;

2. Close consultation with DESE staff to make sure all elements of the Agreement are vetted with department heads and legal staff; and

3. Compromise within the Planning Board itself to ensure that important issues for each community are considered and the final draft language reflects an Agreement that provides benefits to all the communities involved.

In spite of the Regional Planning Board's best efforts, the second draft of the Regional Agreement may not be the final one. A third and even fourth draft may be necessary before approval can be obtained. A new series of public forums/focus groups should be scheduled to present the changes, especially if they are substantive. Better to hold an extra round of public forums than to have the vote fail because people felt they were not heard.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 4 - Submission of Proposed Regional Agreement for Public Review**

* 1. **Present Final Regional Agreement to Public Prior to Vote**

Once the Regional Agreement is in its final form and has been vetted by DESE, and the Long Range Educational and Structural Plan is completed and approved by DESE, it is time to present them to the public. Another series of meetings should be held prior to Town Meetings. All key town boards and officials should be present, including:

* Boards of Selectmen
* Finance Boards
* School Committees
* School Staff/Unions

In preparation for these public presentations, the Communications Sub-Committee should create a modified version of the past presentations. This new presentation should be concise and contain only the most important information even if that information has already been presented in previous focus groups/forums.

The goal of this more abbreviated presentation will be to:

* Briefly explain the Regional Planning Process (1-2 slides);
* Clearly explain the advantages of regionalization, the challenges, and implications for each community should they opt not to regionalize at this time (3 slides);
* Explain in simple terms the effect that regionalization will have on the average taxpayer (1-2 slides);
* Present in simple terms the elements of the proposed Agreement (5-6 slides); and
* Close the meeting by officially stating the Regional Planning Board’s recommendation, noting support from other local boards and committees if applicable.

The Regional Planning Board should give consideration as to who on the board should be presenting at each town meeting. Most often, the Chairperson may be the best candidate but another member(s) may be more appropriate after considering the political climate in each community. In some cases, it may be advantageous to have representatives from DESE or MSBA either participating in the presentation or simply be present to answer questions. Remember to request permission from each Town Moderator to have these individuals and any Regional Planning Board members who are non-residents attend the Town Meeting.

The goal of this final round of meetings is mainly to get votes of approval from key leadership in each of the participating towns in advance of the Town Meetings. The Regional Planning Board Chair will need to contact the respective chairs of these groups to schedule the meetings. It works well if the Regional Planning Board makes the effort to take their presentation to regularly scheduled meetings of these groups. In some cases, two or more of the groups may offer to hold joint meetings.

Unlike the previous public forums, the purpose of these meetings is not to gather input regarding changes to the Agreement as this has already been completed. The purpose is to present the final Agreement and the Long Range Educational and Structural Plan and to highlight the main features of both.

While the Regional Planning Board may be limited in its ability to distribute flyers and brochures that explain and promote the vote to regionalize, registered ballot action committees in each community may do so. It is important that those committees have accurate data and present their information in a positive manner. Very often a campaign to support regionalization that focuses too much on the dangers or negatives of not regionalizing can turn voters off. Any and all flyers circulated on behalf of the Regional Planning Board should have prior review/approval by the Communications Sub-Committee to verify accuracy and tone of the message.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 5 - Voter and State Approval**

1. **Request Warrant Article for Town Meeting Vote**

At this point in the process, you have completed the Regional Agreement, which has been fully vetted by DESE and the Commissioner of Education has approved it. At your next meeting of the Regional Planning Board, you should take a vote to approve the Regional Agreement.

You have also completed your Long Range Educational and Structural Plan, and it, too, has been accepted by DESE as a final document.

At the next meeting with the Boards of Selectmen, the Regional Planning Board should submit a memo requesting that an article regarding regionalization be placed on the warrant for the upcoming Town Meeting. In doing so, it is helpful to provide, in writing, specific language for the article. Keep in mind that these presentations/meetings need to be posted by both the Regional Planning Board and the various committees, as the meetings are open to the public.

The Chairperson of the Regional Planning Board should, if possible, work collaboratively with local Boards of Selectmen and Town Moderators to ensure that the process for voting on this important issue is well thought-out, the meeting is posted early and well advertised, and instructions for the voters are clear and easy to understand.

A sample "Letter of Transmittal" can be found in Appendix **J**. This letter can be used to request that the vote on the Regional Agreement be placed on the warrant for Town Meeting.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 5 - Voter and State Approval**

1. **Vote by Ballot at Town Meeting**

If the voters in each of the towns involved approve the Regional Agreement or amended Regional Agreement, in doing so, they approve the formation of the new or expansion of the regional school district. If any one of the towns does not approve the Regional Agreement, the new regional school district or expansion of the district does not go forward at that time.

If the vote is favorable in all the communities, the Regional Planning Board must then request certified votes from the respective Town Clerks. Be aware that depending on the practices of each town clerk office, these documents may take up to two months to be received. The certified votes must be sent to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. This will be explained in Phase I, Step 5d on page 66 of this document.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 5 - Voter and State Approval**

1. **Sign Regional Agreement**

If the members of the Regional Planning Board have not yet signed the Regional Agreement, a meeting should be scheduled after the town votes are taken and as the Regional Planning Board awaits the certified votes from the Town Clerks. At the next meeting of town officials in each town, a representative(s) of the Regional Planning Board should present the Regional Agreement for their signatures and minutes of the meetings should reflect their formal approval of the document.

Some communities choose to have a "Signing Party" and schedule a meeting of the combined town Boards, School Committee and the Regional Planning Board. As a minimum, the new Agreement must bear the signatures of all members of the Regional Planning Board, the head of the Select Board and the Chair of the School Committee, but if additional members of each of the boards wish to sign, that is fine, too. Once again, minutes from this combined meeting must note that the Regional Agreement was accepted as presented and signed.

# Phase I: Form/Expand/Enlarge a Regional School District

**Step 5 - Voter and State Approval**

1. **Send Signed Agreement and Certified Votes to DESE for Commissioner for Approval**

Once the certified votes have been received by the Regional Planning Board, the Board Chair, Secretary or the Communications Sub-Committee should compose a cover letter to the Commissioner of Education for final approval of the newly established region. The submission packet should include the following documents:

* Cover letter from the Regional Planning Board Chair;
* Long Range Educational and Structural Plan (Including Transition Plan);
* Regional Agreement signed by Regional Planning Board, School Committees and Town Officials; and
* Certified Votes.

It is important to remember that all documentation has been submitted to DESE and the Commissioner of Education has formally approved the new region no later than December if the Planning Board wants the new district to become official the following July 1. If the December deadline is missed, the region can still go forward but it will have to wait another year.

A sample of such a letter used by a new region is included below.

July 19

Commissioner

MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

75 Pleasant Street

Malden, MA 02148

Dear Commissioner:

Attached please find a copy of the Final Regionalization Agreement presented to Town A and Town B Boards of Selectmen by our Regional School District Planning Board.

We would like to acknowledge the assistance that DESE representatives have provided to our Board over the last eleven months as we have studied this issue and developed the Agreement language and assessment formula. Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools has also helped our Board tremendously by providing us with technical assistance and information on other Regional Districts throughout this process.

The attached agreement and our recommendation, as you know, were presented at Town B Town Meeting on June 7 and it passed overwhelmingly. It was also presented at the Town A Special Town Meeting on June 21 at which residents voted to also approve the agreement. Those certified votes are all contained in this packet.

We look forward to receiving DESE approval for the proposed new region. Please let me know if you require any additional information. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Respectfully submitted,

Chairperson

Town A - Town B Regional School District Planning Board

Enclosure

cc: Chairperson, Town B School Committee

Chairperson, Town A School Committee