

Pittsfield School District Tuition Study Committee
Final Report to the Pittsfield School Board
Executive Summary
June 2021

Background

Pursuant to the 2020 passage of the following warrant article submitted by petition,

“Are you in favor of instructing the Pittsfield School Board, to in good faith, investigate and pursue viable options for tuitioning all students grades 9 through 12 to another high school(s) and to cease educating all high school students in Pittsfield?”,

The Pittsfield School Board authorized a Tuition Study Committee to conduct research and report its findings back to the Board. This Executive Summary - and the presentation to follow - constitute 10 months of work across 5 subcommittees by 7 members of the community joined by Interim Superintendent, John Graziano.

Key Findings by Subcommittees

What Pittsfield High School Offers in Comparison with Other Districts

One subcommittee studied Pittsfield High School in depth, while a separate subcommittee gathered information across several criteria to compare Pittsfield with seven other high schools that have expressed an interest in accepting Pittsfield students.

Across every category, Pittsfield offers fewer absolute academic and extracurricular opportunities for students than the other districts, although this varies on a per-student basis after controlling for differences in school size. Pittsfield pays its teaching staff, on average, far less than the other districts, has a lower percentage of experienced teachers, and has a lower percentage of teachers certified in their respective subject areas. Pittsfield's starting teacher salary (\$31,213.00) in 2019-20 was ranked 152 out of 154 districts statewide, resulting in a high staff turnover rate. Student outcomes are almost universally at the lower end and are often significantly poorer than all others in the comparison. Pittsfield also has a far higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students and a significantly higher percentage of special education students than the comparison districts.

For Pittsfield students who have come up through the elementary and middle school, Pittsfield High School provides continuity and familiarity with other students, families, educators, and the community in general. Pittsfield educators and community members take great pride in the variety of student supports - in school and out - that they offer or leverage, and town pride in school sports teams is high.

With the increased availability of online content and instruction from multiple sources, some students may also find academic success regardless of the location of a brick and mortar school.

Socioeconomic Considerations

Winchester, NH, is very similar to Pittsfield in terms of population and town valuation, and we believe it is also the only town in the state to have closed its own existing town high school to tuition its students to another high school in a different district (Keene). Closed in 2006 due to concerns about a high tax rate and the underperformance of its high school, Winchester serves as a useful case study. Contrary to the town's hopes and expectations, the local education portion of the tax rate has increased exponentially again in recent years, and it has been higher than Pittsfield's rate for the last three years. Winchester voters recently slashed the school budget by \$1 million+. Because the costs of its high school contract with Keene must be honored, however, all cuts were made at the K-8 level. In addition, Winchester eliminated all bus transportation for high school students to and from Keene. (NH state law does not require a district to provide transportation for high school students),

While some residents expressed nostalgia and regret at losing their local high school, the vast majority expressed the belief that the quality of the education and the number of opportunities available in Keene was better than Winchester could provide on its own. A number of trade-offs in

terms of distance, barriers to participation, and loss of a small town school were also cited by residents.

Tuition Contracts

Tuition contracts typically contain several major elements that must be carefully considered, including: tuition calculations, rental charges, special education costs, transportation, policies on services, definition of eligible students, representation on school boards, term (length of contract), provisions for early termination, and dispute resolution.

By definition, a tuition agreement means that the sending district has less control over the policies and the costs of educating their students. Of special interest are policies and costs for educating special education students (of particular concern, given Pittsfield's high percentage of such students and the significantly higher contract costs typically assessed for this population), the cost and increased time required for transportation, whether a receiving district will accept any and all Pittsfield high school students, length of contract term, and sending district voting/voice in the receiving district's decisions, including obligation of capital costs for expanded/renovated facilities. If there is more than one sending town, the contract should be explicit about any consequences for Pittsfield if one of the other towns severs its relationship with the receiving district or fails to renew its contract.

While a larger school may offer economies of scale, the fact that virtually every other comparison district pays its teachers a significantly higher salary may negate some of those perceived savings in tuition costs.

Budget and Facilities Considerations

An analysis of the cost savings of closing Pittsfield High School and the resulting funds that could be applied to a tuition contract suggests that a tuition contract may not reduce, and may in fact increase, the tax burden on Pittsfield taxpayers. The expenses for several shared positions and line items are currently split between schools, resulting in less than 100% in cost savings. While a sample analysis demonstrated marginal cost savings based solely on tuition of regular students, these savings will not cover the significant additional expenses associated with special education, transportation, and rental charges.

Careful attention should be paid to terminology. Per student tuition costs, for example, are very different from the average Cost per Pupil. The latter represents, with certain adjustments, current expenditures from all funding sources (local, state and federal) associated with the daily operation of schools, including operating expenses, tuition, equipment, construction, interest and non-K-12 expenditures and then divided by the Average Daily Membership in Attendance (ADM-A). The statewide average for Cost per Pupil in 2018-2019 was \$19,806.50.

The costs associated with re-purposing the current Pittsfield High School building will largely depend on the nature of that re-purposing and the extent to which modifications or repairs might be required by code for that use.

Public Input Session

On May 8th, 2021, the Tuition Study Committee held a public forum to present information and solicit feedback from the community. Many comments from community members related to concerns about special education, the ability of a receiving district to accept all Pittsfield students now and in the future, the extent of participation and "voice" in decisions (by Pittsfield students and Pittsfield residents), whether another district is the best solution to address the root cause of poverty in Pittsfield, a caution that we need to know the total potential number of Pittsfield students (including those currently homeschooled or in private schools), and how online education might alter assumptions and opportunities.

Residents also asked that people "think outside the box" to consider hybrid options, rather than the duality of simply considering a choice between Pittsfield and another district. Articulating and researching such options, however, was beyond the scope and charge of this committee's work.