

A Feasibility Study on the Regionalization of the
Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great
Meadows Regional School Districts

Rowan School Regionalization Institute
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study outlines the potential consolidation or expansion of shared services among five New Jersey (NJ) school districts under the School Regionalization Efficiency Program (SREP), which supports public school districts and governing bodies across the state who wish to study the feasibility of school district regionalization and/or consolidation to improve efficiency and reduce costs.

The purpose of this study is to examine relevant data in order to provide recommendations on the feasibility of consolidating operations to form one all purpose, grades pre-kindergarten (pK) to 12, regional school district or to share services more effectively and efficiently among the boards of education of five school districts: the grades pK-12 Belvidere School District (Belvidere); the grades pK-8 Harmony Township School District (Harmony); the grades pK-8 Hope Township School District (Hope); the grades pK-8 White Township School District (White); and the grades pK-8 Great Meadows Regional School District (Great Meadows). The study examines district operations in four areas that make up the major domains of this study: governance and law; demography; education and program; and finance and operations.

The reorganization options to be studied include:

1. Consolidating all school districts into one all purpose, regional school district for students in grades pK-12;
2. Revising existing send-receive agreements, or developing new ones, to send all grades 6-8 students to a combined middle school program;
3. Closing Belvidere High School, reorganizing Belvidere into a pK-8 school district, and having each pK-8 district create a new send-receive relationship with another Warren County high school district for students in grades 9-12; and
4. Maintaining the status quo with opportunities to better align educational programs and support services while reducing or controlling the costs of educating students in each district through the expansion of shared services and other efficiencies.

There are potentially three distinctive focal points of the scenarios noted above which go beyond our standard model. One is the desire of the districts in the first two options to consider the benefits of a middle school program for all 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. Another is to consider the value of closing Belvidere High School (Belvidere HS), among the smallest high schools in the state, in response to declining enrollment over time and its effects on educational effectiveness and financial efficiency.

The final unique aspect of this study involves the inclusion of Great Meadows, a regional pK-8 school district, which is a neighboring district but not part of the historic cluster. Great Meadows currently sends, and for many decades has sent, its grades 9-12 students to Hackettstown High School (Hackettstown HS) in the Hackettstown School District (Hackettstown) under a send-receive agreement. Great Meadows officials expressed their interest in studying a regional approach with both Hackettstown

and Belvidere. Until very recently, Hackettstown had not signaled an interest in a feasibility study, so the Great Meadows Board of Education decided to engage in this one, which was approved by the NJ Division of Local Government Services.

The Sweeney Center for Public Policy and Rowan University's College of Education have formed the Rowan School Regionalization Institute to assess the new school regionalization law, make policy recommendations, and conduct regionalization studies for interested districts. The Sweeney Center is led by Mark Magyar, who developed the new school regionalization law and has advised over three dozen districts, while the Rowan College of Education is represented by David Lindenmuth, a former superintendent in multiple NJ counties.

The Institute retained a team of expert consultants with deep experience in school administration, law, finance, operations, and demographics to conduct this feasibility study. This includes: former superintendent G. Kennedy Greene as lead investigator and project manager; attorney and former Commissioner of Education Lucille Davy; school business experts Brian Falkowski and Donna Snyder-DeVita; education data specialist Brian Diamante; former superintendent Scott Oswald; demographic analyst George Sundell; and transportation analyst Ray Kuehner. The study was commissioned by the Belvidere Board of Education, with the support of the other districts, to examine the feasibility of regionalization or expanded shared services across the districts.

Governance and Law

The pK-8 school districts of Harmony, Hope and White send their grades 9-12 students currently to pK-12 Belvidere on a tuition basis through a send-receive relationship. In order to consolidate Belvidere and its sending districts into a single pK-12 district, the districts would have to form a new regional district. Should the respective boards of education decide to pursue creation of a new regional district, state law requires that the voters of each of the communities will determine whether they support such a change. To move forward with forming a pK-12 regional, a majority of voters in each of the districts must agree. If any one of the communities reject such a proposal, the plan for creating a new regional district would fail, and the districts would continue to operate as they currently exist.

Adding Great Meadows to a proposal to form a new pK-12 regional district is more complex and would require Great Meadows to obtain permission from the Commissioner of Education to withdraw from its existing send-receive relationship with Hackettstown to which Great Meadows sends its students in grades 9-12 currently.

A new regional school district without Great Meadows would have four constituent municipalities and a nine member board of education (i.e., 4 from White, 2 from Belvidere, 2 from Harmony, 1 from Hope). A proposed regional district with Great Meadows would have six constituent municipalities and also a nine member board (i.e., 2 from Independence, 2 from White, 2 from Liberty, 1 from Belvidere, 1 from Harmony, 1 from Hope).

The Division of Local Government Services, which provided the grant that funded this study, offers implementation grants of up to \$400,000 under the Local Efficiency Achievement Program to cover one-time costs for regionalization and shared services initiatives.

Discussion among district leadership and boards of education, followed by the development and approval of specific contracts, would be necessary to design and adopt shared services between the schools and districts in the region.

Another option being studied is to expand the existing send-receive relationships between Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White. In this case, the three pK-8 districts would continue to educate their own students in grades pK-5 and then send them to Belvidere for grades 6-12, allowing for expanded middle school education opportunities for all of the students who are now attending Belvidere HS for grades 9-12.

By entering into a send-receive relationship with Belvidere, Great Meadows could send its students in grades 6 to 8 to Belvidere as well, while continuing to send its high school students to Hackettstown. Great Meadows could also host the region's grades 6-8 students through new send-receive agreements with White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere. These two options are unlikely to be seen as prudent, and will receive less attention in the remainder of the study.

The final option under consideration is the closing of Belvidere HS and restructuring Belvidere into a grades pK-8 district. In this case, each community would have to establish a new send-receive relationship with another district to educate its grades 9-12 students. Closing the existing high school would be complicated and require approval from the State in addition to identifying high schools for all of the students. This option would also frustrate the goal of creating and expanding a more integrated educational experience for all of the students attending these districts. It is not recommended that this be pursued unless the communities are convinced that the benefits of doing so decisively outweigh the drawbacks.

It is difficult to envision any advantage to studying closing Belvidere HS while including Great Meadows, as Great Meadows is a pK-8 district that sends its grades 9-12 students to Hackettstown HS via a longstanding, send-receive relationship. Hackettstown HS is also the closest high school in the county to Great Meadows. As a result, this option will not be considered further in this study.

The NJ Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) is the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE) monitoring and district self-evaluation system for public school districts. Each district scored admirably in its most recently completed cycles (2021-22 for Hope and White, 2022-23 for Belvidere, 2023-24 for Harmony and Great Meadows) and was deemed high performing in all but one category in two of the districts. Additional alignment among the districts through a consolidation of the boards of education could aid in strengthening those scores in a more universal manner while reducing the time spent on completing the self evaluation and review. That time may then be redirected toward students, staff, and program development.

Selected board of education members and administrators from Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows were invited to participate in a steering committee to help provide direction, and seek clarification on issues impacting each community. The Committee met in January 2024 to learn more about the process, review a scope of work including delivery timelines, go step by step through an outline of the study, and identify specific lines of inquiry that would reflect local concerns. Committee members were asked to go back and share information with their respective boards of education and collect any questions and feedback to share with the study team. The Committee met again in August 2024 for a progress update and was presented a draft of the study in January 2025 to review for input on the final product.

Additional input came from a variety of sources including: staff interviews with members of each district; and surveys of Belvidere HS students, White students, parents, and staff, Hope alumni, Harmony parents, and Great Meadows students, parents, and staff.

Demography

Five of the six municipalities in the central region of Warren County, NJ (all except for Hope) have experienced modest population decline between 2018 and 2022, which is a significant change from twenty year average declines of 40-44%. Independence remains the largest municipality by population, while Hope is the smallest. All communities have undergone significant shifts in racial and ethnic demographics over four years, generally showing increases in minority populations and decreases among whites. Median ages have increased slightly in most, except for larger increases in Belvidere and Liberty, indicating that families are aging in place in those two communities. Median household incomes saw a variety of changes across the municipalities.

Births in the Belvidere area have been averaging 83 per year and trending 4+ births each year for the last six years. Births in the Great Meadows area have been averaging 71 per year and trending 2+ births each year for the last six years.

Housing data indicate that there are no planned major housing developments in any of the six municipalities that might impact school enrollment at this time. Permitting averages 27 units per year. As a percentage of the total units in each community, these are marginal increases in housing with either approval for construction or those for which certificates of occupancy have been issued.

The enrollment history in the Belvidere Cluster from 2018 to 2024 shows an overall decrease of 13.7% from 1,316 to 1,157 students. That said, the total enrollment for the cluster of school districts has been stable over the most recent four years. The average migration ratios across grades K-12 indicate that the number of students transitioning from one grade level to the next is 0.97, a slightly decreasing but relatively consistent flow of students through the school system.

The enrollment history in Great Meadows from 2018 to 2024 shows an overall decrease of 9.3% from 1,024 to 937 students. The average migration ratios across grades K-12 indicate that the number of students transitioning from one grade level to the next is 1.00, which denotes a stable flow of students through the school system.

Using a modified cohort survival model, the overall growth in enrollment in the Belvidere Cluster over the next five years is projected to be 77 students from the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 1,157 students, an aggregate increase of 6.7% or about 1.3% per year. While this may sound stable, it is a drastic turnaround from the preceding two decades of aggregate enrollment declines of 40-44% across the board for these four districts. The overall growth in enrollment in Great Meadows over the next five years is projected to be 40 students from the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 937 students, an aggregate increase of 4.8% or just under 1.0% per year. Like the Belvidere Cluster, this must be seen as an important moment of stability within the context of an aggregate enrollment decline of 37% over the previous twenty years.

An enlargement of the current four district Belvidere Cluster, or together with Great Meadows, into an all-purpose regional district would not alter the overall enrollment projections in any way. Combining Great Meadows and the Belvidere Cluster would result in a total enrollment projected to grow to 2,212 students by 2028-29. The size and scope of such a district would provide it with an ability to be more flexible in terms of resource allocation to provide more effective levels of instructional and support programs without incurring significant additional costs.

If an all purpose regional district is not pursued or achieved, combining grades 6-8 in a Belvidere Cluster send-receive middle school program is a possibility from a historic enrollment perspective at the combined site of Belvidere HS and Belvidere Elementary School (Belvidere ES). Doing the same at Great Meadows Middle School (Great Meadows MS) could be accomplished logistically if Liberty Township School were to be reopened. The enrollment point of view must be balanced with an analysis of classroom availability and transportation costs/times, which will be done later in this study.

If Belvidere were to decide to close its high school, it would be in possession of a large building on the same site as Belvidere ES. In 2003-04, these two buildings held 964 students, making it possible for the four Belvidere Cluster communities to at least consider consolidating their elementary districts into one pK-8 district to be housed at a single central site.

The districts could also consider expanding preschool programs, which would require as many as 10 pK classrooms in the Belvidere Cluster and 8 pK classrooms in Great Meadows to serve all eligible students. Overall, these projections suggest that forming an all-purpose regional district would not significantly alter current enrollment trends. Expanding shared services too would have minimal, if any, impact on enrollment.

Looking at the disaggregated data by race, ethnicity, income, and language, the Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows show some similarities as well as some modest differences. Bringing the two groups together to form an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district would move toward balancing out the variations exhibited as separate entities. The data indicates that creating an all-purpose, regional school district for Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows will not create any significant demographic or enrollment changes in the school district. However, the impact of a potential withdrawal of Great Meadows from its send-receive agreement with Hackettstown for its grade 9-12 students does pose significant demographic concerns.

Education and Program

This domain examined the educational impact of the various options outlined earlier in this study. The following question is guiding our investigation: *Will the creation of an all purpose regional school district, a send-receive middle school program, or the closing of Belvidere HS produce educational benefits or challenges for staff and students, including traditionally underserved populations, when compared to the status quo?*

This domain will look at possible educational enhancements or challenges that may be realized by examining the existing profile of each school district and then exploring curricular programs and philosophies, recent performance measures, the availability of specialized programs, extracurricular offerings, and indicators of school climate and culture. It will also examine staffing patterns and make some projections.

The Curriculum and Instruction section had three focal points. The first looked at the curricular programs offered by the elementary and middle schools in Great Meadows, White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere. The second investigated the programs typically found in middle schools as compared to the offerings in the Belvidere Cluster's elementary schools. The third compared the curricular programs offered by Belvidere HS, Hackettstown HS, and several other area high schools. The benefits of program coordination between the elementary/middle schools and Belvidere HS were also addressed.

The analysis demonstrates that students entering Belvidere HS from elementary schools in White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere have differing educational backgrounds. Great Meadows joining an all purpose regional district would bring another set of disparate learning foundations. Having all students entering high school with shared experiences in terms of educational programs and philosophy, time spent studying each of those content areas, and the professional learning that accompanies those programs can offer several benefits.

- Teachers of upper grades should see greater consistency in student experiences, which translates into lessons that meet the needs of more students.
- 9th grade staff members would have a much greater awareness of the common skills students have likely mastered and those skills in which they will likely have to develop further. Teachers of the upper grades can more easily share with the teachers of the lower grades the data and information they need to help them plan and adjust their instruction.
- The alignment of assessment tools would allow both sending and receiving teachers to speak a common language when they have access to consistent data about student strengths and areas where additional support may be needed.
- Consistency in the time allotted to literacy and math instruction among others could produce more consistent results among students and better prepare them for success in high school.

Overall, shared educational programs in grades pK-8 can contribute to more cohesive and effective approaches to a student's education, benefiting both students and educators alike. Better alignment of

programs in all grades pK-12 would result from regionalization or shared services. This would allow staff to further investigate programs and their results prior to making a decision about investments in them. Reducing the replication of program review, curriculum writing, and professional learning not only comes with financial benefits, but should also result in stronger academic programs throughout the region.

Overall, one central regional curriculum office serving students in grades pK-12 can play a vital role in providing cohesive direction, support, and coordination for curriculum and instructional practices within the schools that comprise the region, ultimately leading to improved student achievement and success. A more coordinated curriculum in pK-8 would result in students reaching 9th grade better prepared for high school expectations and allow high school teachers to spend less time establishing a baseline of common understandings and expectations with students.

An all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district made up of the four districts in the Belvidere Cluster plus Great Meadows would allow for at least one administrative staff member (e.g., assistant superintendent, director of instruction) to be devoted largely to the leadership of curriculum coordination and instructional supervision. Regionalizing the Belvidere Cluster alone would still create a large enough scale to justify a significant portion of a staff member's role to focus on greater alignment and connectivity in the academic program.

The analysis also showed that to achieve the goals of a successful middle school, it is preferable to educate grades 6-8 middle school students in a separate school or program with a sufficient enrollment size that allows for greater opportunities to address their educational needs as well as their social and emotional learning. In addition, middle schools often have teachers with specific subject matter expertise teaching the core content areas of English language arts (ELA), Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, which can provide students with a deeper level of instruction. A middle school would provide a much different experience for adolescent students, both in terms of academic opportunities as well as social and emotional well-being and development.

Each of the four districts in the Belvidere Cluster has a relatively small number of students in grades 6-8, making it difficult for any of the districts to have subject matter and grade level team teaching, a hallmark of most middle schools. If these grade levels were combined so that all students in grades 6-8 attended a single middle school program, there would be 275 students, which would allow for grade level teams with specific subject matter expertise in every content area and a fuller range of student extracurricular activities. If Great Meadows joined, the middle school would have about 500 students, which would provide an even greater opportunity for the high quality experiences that are envisioned for middle school students.

A primary educational reason to consider closing a small high school would be concerns about the breadth and depth of the academic program that can be offered to students. It is believed that high schools with small enrollments may not have the scale to offer a comprehensive array of courses of study to provide students with sufficient challenges and opportunities in their areas of academic interest. Comparing the offerings for AP, honors, and dual credit courses with neighboring high schools, Belvidere HS's enrollment size has not provided an impediment to offering a reasonably broad and deep

curriculum with many options to challenge and provide academic opportunities to its students. Its program of studies compares favorably to similarly sized high schools in the area and, in some ways, even to ones with much larger enrollments.

Class size data reveals the differentiation not only between districts but even within them. This is a challenge especially for districts with one school and those with low enrollment schools, who often have just one or two classrooms per grade level. It makes it hard to attain efficiencies in personnel allocation and student to teacher ratios. For the most part, however, the data show that all districts in the study are generally below, at, or at least close to suggested maximums. Regionalization of the districts may allow for decisions on more efficient placement or sharing of teaching staff to reduce class sizes slightly at particular schools and/or grade levels.

In general, instructional times are consistent with other districts in the area. However, the alignment of the school day and instructional day across the districts, or in an all purpose regional district, would provide a more even playing field for all students in these schools.

The impact of the pandemic on standardized test scores has been deep but varied depending on multiple factors, including the level of disruption to education, the availability of resources for remote learning, and the effectiveness of mitigation strategies. To a great extent, statewide assessment scores among these districts have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, although more work is needed. There remain significant disparities among the elementary assessment scores in both ELA and Math at various grade levels. This adds further evidence to the recommendations on the desirability of better curriculum coordination, common philosophies and instructional materials, and similar instructional time devoted to academic work.

The 2022-23 mSGPs indicate that student growth met or exceeded the standard with the one exception being ELA results at Belvidere ES. The range of student growth scores provides an opportunity for district leaders, working within a regional setting, to examine the programs and instructional practices that are yielding the highest levels of student growth demonstrated in ELA and Math. By combining district- and building-level supervisory staff and reassigning responsibilities closely aligned to areas of expertise, a regional school district can better serve and provide targeted support to the teachers preparing students to meet or exceed academic standards and leave high school ready for college and careers.

Belvidere HS is graduating students at or above the state average in most cases, which compares favorably to the total graduation rate between it and the state average. In the case of students with disabilities, the school is doing quite well in preparing its students to meet their graduation requirements and earn their diplomas. Postsecondary enrollment rates show that Belvidere HS is above the state average for the Class of 2022.

The study examines special education services, intervention programs, and enrichment opportunities across the school districts. An obvious sign of the collaboration between Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White is that they share one special services director who oversees the child study teams for the entire cluster. The high rates of in-district placements speak well of each district's efforts to be effective

and efficient while educating students in their home schools with their non-disabled peers. The districts each offer the following in-district special education programs: preschool integrated with special and general education students, multiple disabilities at all levels, pull-out resource replacement, and in-class resource support. Depending on the number of students in any given year, efficiencies may be found in consolidating one or more of these programs into one or even two of the elementary schools.

Intervention and referral services are the vehicle commonly found in NJ's pK-12 schools to support students who are experiencing academic, behavioral, or health difficulties that may be impacting their educational performance. Each district has its own team and process for identification and support.

The low numbers of English language learners in these schools do not require a full bilingual program, but eligible students must receive either English language services or an English as a second language program. These could perhaps be more effectively or efficiently serviced by existing staff if united into one all purpose, regional school district or a grades 6-8 combined middle school program.

Gifted and talented programs show some similarities and some differences in their approaches and the number of students involved. Similar to the recommendations made for special education, a unified approach in one all purpose, regional district or a combined grades 6-8 middle school program could offer more expanded and cohesive program opportunities to more children using existing staff.

Despite its small enrollment, Belvidere HS offers 20 interscholastic athletic programs and 21 student clubs. Students are taking advantage of these opportunities at an impressive rate; in the 2023-24 school year, total participation in these activities by Belvidere HS students was 998 for an average of 3.2 activities per student.

While each pK-8 school offers some club activities to their students, none of them offer athletic opportunities, which is not uncommon for smaller elementary schools typically due to enrollment and/or finances. One of the benefits of a combined middle school for grades 6-8 would be the possibility of offering interscholastic athletic programs for competition against peers within the county and beyond. Aligning clubs and activities across schools has the potential to create common experiences upon which students can draw, particularly in the areas of athletics and the arts, where skill development is essential for success. Even well-aligned pK-8 programs would benefit students as they approach their high school years.

It is not easy to draw definitive conclusions on staffing levels without being explicit about what one values. For example, each of the districts has a lower student to teacher ratio than the midpoint of its peers and the state median. This is a good thing in that it creates potential opportunities for more personalized attention, which has been correlated with higher student achievement. It could also be construed as a somewhat inefficient use of human and fiscal resources that could be reallocated to address other needs.

As for staff salaries, one's view of the amounts and rankings is also dependent upon value judgments as well as comparison groups. In Belvidere, the salaries in each of the three categories are below state medians but around the midpoint of the peer districts. This is because the state medians are based on all

K-12 school districts (whether small, medium or large), whereas the peers are just the small K-12s. Having lower salaries than medium or large K-12s is probably to be expected, however it does not help the district in competing with them for personnel talent.

Looking at K-8 school district salaries, there is considerable variety among Great Meadows, White, Hope, and Harmony as compared to its peers and the state median. Teacher salaries make up the majority of personnel costs, and the differences here will need to be considered should the districts pursue regionalization.

It is important to have experience and stability among staff members to provide students with a sense of continuity and belonging. The average teaching experience in all five districts exceeds that of the state average by anywhere from two to four years. The teaching staff is stable in these districts too, as the percentage with four or more years on staff is anywhere from five to eighteen percent above the state average. Similarly, the average administrator experience is from two to seven years longer than the state average. However, stability is uneven as Great Meadows, Belvidere, and White have long-serving district leaders, while Harmony's principal enters a second year in the role and Hope's chief school administrator recently left the district.

Teachers working outside their field of certification has emerged as a statewide concern, as demand for certified and non-certified personnel continues to outweigh supply. It is not surprising to find the issue impacting Hope and Harmony especially, as each has fewer than three dozen staff members and one or two working outside their certifications could shift this data greatly.

Projecting staffing needs for consolidated districts is based on a great deal of context and requires setting some parameters. The objective should be to provide equal or improved educational services to students through optimized staffing and operations wherever possible. This study considers it a given that all existing schools will remain open and operate with most school-level positions remaining as they presently do. With school-level staff remaining relatively constant, the opportunities for efficiency will be more available by combining some positions on district office staffs, though there is a great deal of role sharing happening already.

Currently, there are administrative tasks replicated in five school districts that could be completed once. From state monitoring to district audits to routine report filings and countless other tasks, these responsibilities are done five times each time a deadline for said report or data upload is needed. This replication costs both time and money and drains resources from other productive uses. The reduction of this overlap would almost certainly result in staffing efficiencies and the ability to save money or redirect funding back to educational programming.

The creation of a combined middle school program in the Belvidere Cluster would be a school level change versus a district reorganization. Achieving the benefits of a combined program will need focused leadership that may require additional personnel capacity, especially if the site is Belvidere in light of the recent administrative restructuring there.

From curriculum development and implementation to staffing and supervision and more, we were unable to identify any area where a full grades pK-12 regionalization or a combined grades 6-8 (or 7-8) middle school program would be detrimental to the students or to their success. In fact, the study comes to the conclusion that a consolidation of the districts and/or programs can only lead to educational opportunities for all students to be offered in a more effective and efficient manner.

Finance and Operations

This domain of the study examines the financial implications of the regionalization of Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows. The primary finance methodology was to analyze all internal and public financial data to draw conclusions on efficiency, determined solely by the aggregate amount of savings for the all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district when compared to the status quo. For purposes of this financial analysis, only the regionalization scenarios both with and without Great Meadows require analysis of state aid or tax apportionment. State aid is not impacted by the reorganization of the middle school program nor the closing of Belvidere HS, and tax apportionment is not necessary unless a regional school district is created.

For the purpose of estimating state aid in both the status quo and regionalization scenarios, the consultants implemented a model approximating the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) funding formula. State aid estimates for future years are based on the enrollment, demographic, property value, and aggregate income trends in each participating school district and municipality.

The participating districts show divergent state aid trajectories from 2020 to 2025. While Belvidere maintained relatively stable aid with moderate fluctuations, Harmony saw minimal changes due to its lack of equalization aid. In the eyes of the state's funding formula, Harmony is more than able to raise sufficient funds and therefore the state provides categorical aid proportion to Harmony's enrollment. In contrast, Hope, White, and Great Meadows experienced substantial declines as the revision to SFRA known as S2 eliminated their excess aid. Great Meadows saw the largest reduction, losing \$3.3 million over the period. By 2025, with SFRA fully funded, the districts receive a combined \$5.9 million in state aid, down from \$10.9 million in 2020.

The 2026 to 2029 projections show Great Meadows and Hope experiencing significant aid increases due to enrollment growth and adequacy budget changes. Meanwhile, Belvidere faces gradual declines while Harmony and White see modest categorical aid growth.

Comparable state aid figures were presented for a newly formed, all-purpose, regional school district using two distinct scenarios. First, for a regional school district consisting of the four districts in the Belvidere Cluster (current cluster only); and second, for a regional school district consisting of the Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows (all potential constituents).

These projections demonstrate significant state aid differences between regional and separate district scenarios through 2029. In the "all potential constituents" scenario, operating as separate districts would yield \$4.2 million more in annual state aid by 2029. Similarly, the "current cluster only" scenario shows

nearly \$3 million more annual state aid by 2029 if districts remain separate. This is based upon the consultants' interpretation of the state aid section of S3488, the 2022 school regionalization law.

S3488 included a "locked aid" provision that was intended to guarantee that districts would receive the higher amount of the state aid to which they would be entitled as a new regional district or the amount they would have received as separate districts prior to any regionalization vote. However, the language was imprecise, and the consultants interpret the language to entitle districts only to receive the sum of the state aid they would have received as individual districts in the final year prior to implementation of regionalization, which would not account for future inflationary increases or increases due to changes in enrollment or demography. Furthermore, the legislation only provided that protection through the 2028-2029 school year.

For that reason, the consultants are seeking to clarify this provision in a manner that would provide a clear and unambiguous "hold harmless" state aid protection that promotes the State's demonstrated interest in school district regionalization. The consultants have requested an interpretation of the current S3488 provision from the Department of Education and also engaged with leaders of the State Legislature to include an amendment to new school funding legislation to provide districts that regionalize with the greater of the aid to which they are entitled as a newly regionalized district or the total that the new regional's constituent districts would have received if they had remained separate; the provision would be in effect through the 2033-2034 school years.

School taxes to be levied in the newly created, all-purpose, regional school district must be estimated and a portion of the overall responsibility must be assigned to each individual constituent municipality. To determine the impact of regionalization on tax levies in each participating community, the amounts owed by each constituent are compared to the amounts that each would pay in the status quo scenario.

Two primary methods for apportionment of a regional district's costs are permitted under state law: allocation based on equalized valuations, which distributes costs according to each municipality's property wealth; and allocation based on student enrollment, which assigns costs in proportion to each community's utilization of the district's services.

Equalized valuations across all municipalities are expected to remain consistent with secular trends over the past 25 years showing cyclical peaks and declines. In all communities, valuations reached highs in 2010, bottomed around 2017, trended sideways and up through 2022, and have been rising steadily through the present. Equalized valuations are forecast to continue rising in each district until sometime between 2026 and 2028 before beginning to decline for a number of years.

Significant disparities exist between property wealth and enrollment shares of each individual district. Opposing patterns of benefit are present where some districts in the cluster benefit more from apportionment ratios that weight equalized valuations heavier, and other districts benefit more from apportionment ratios that weight enrollments heavier. These opposing patterns require careful consideration of various apportionment ratios to identify an optimal ratio that provides the most benefit to all communities.

For the "all potential constituents" scenario, the model identified an optimal ratio of 43% equalized valuation to 57% enrollment. In the "current cluster only" scenario, an optimal ratio of 45% equalized / 55% enrollment was identified. **However, while optimal in that each ratio allocates the tax levy equitably to all communities, there is no combination of standard apportionment parameters that produces universal tax benefits to all communities in either regionalization configuration.**

Belvidere and Harmony stand to experience increased costs in a regional district relative to the status quo while Hope and White would see savings. If Great Meadows is included, both Independence and Liberty would experience relative tax increases.

P.L.2021, c.402 permits a board of education to establish a transitional methodology, not to exceed ten years, of the apportionment method adopted by the voters provided that the methodology is agreed to by all participating districts. The language is designed to address situations where standard apportionment methods may not benefit all communities during the consolidation process. The transitional method was envisioned as a tool to facilitate school district regionalization in cases where immediate implementation of a new apportionment method might create financial hardships or disparities among the participating districts. It provides a mechanism to smooth out potential tax impacts over time, making the regionalization process more palatable to all stakeholders.

When looking at budgetary per student costs, the elementary districts are in two separate peer groups: Harmony, Hope, and White are small K-8s, and Great Meadows is a medium K-8. In terms of total budgetary costs per student, it must be noted that the state median of \$19,900 is for all K-8s – small, medium, and large. Great Meadows (\$18,500) is below the state median, while Harmony (\$25,816), White (\$23,493), and Hope (\$22,672) are all well above it. It is difficult for any K-8 district with a small student enrollment to be efficient financially. Consolidating grades 6-8 (or even 7-8) into a combined middle school would be more effective educationally but could result in some greater inefficiencies given the even smaller pK-5 enrollments.

It is clear that all four elementary districts prioritize direct spending on students in terms of the percentage of dollars allocated to classroom instruction. Harmony at 63.4% of its budget and White at 62.2% are exceptional in this regard, and Hope (58.1%) and Great Meadows (57.7%) are keeping pace with the state median (58.0%). This is a strong positive indicator as it provides direct student academic experiences, and therefore should receive primary attention and commitment in the district budget.

Another item worth noting is that Harmony (9.6%), White (9.9%), and Great Meadows (10.0%) are below the state median percentage (10.4%) in administrative spending, and Hope (10.9%) is right nearby. This is likely due to the number of positions with multiple responsibilities in each district, confirming previous analysis in this study. Lower spending on administration is often identified by the public as an area to realize potential efficiencies in education.

As a small K-12 district, Belvidere suffers from the same efficiency issues as its small K-8 sending districts. Its total budgetary per student cost (\$20,224) is 8% higher than the state median of \$18,727 for all K-12s. However, Belvidere is at the state median percentage in classroom instruction. It is also among the highest in its peer group and more than double the state median percentage in

extracurriculars. Combining these two spending categories shows how much Belvidere prioritizes spending on direct student programming.

Both regionalization scenarios project modest financial benefits through cost savings. The "all potential constituents" scenario generates gross cost savings of \$558,000 annually, while the "current cluster only" scenario projects savings of \$178,000. These savings would primarily come from consolidating administrative functions and reducing duplicative services across the current constituent districts. Despite these cost savings, the consultants intend for all existing programs to be maintained. The actual implementation and allocation of any cost reductions would ultimately be determined by the board of education of the regional school district, ensuring that decisions about resource allocation will be made with consideration of the regional district's specific needs and priorities in mind.

Despite these potential savings, the amount falls far short of the cost savings that would be necessary to provide universal tax benefits to all communities under the allowed methods. The consultants estimate that \$2.7 million in cost savings would need to be present.

Additionally, the cost savings detailed in the study represent *potential* tax savings, as the actual impact on future tax levies in each municipality will depend on decisions made by the future board of education of the regional school district. The board will need to balance potential tax relief against the educational programming needs of the district.

The study considers the use of a transitional apportionment method, as permitted by recent changes to NJ law. The flexibility afforded by P.L. 2021, c.402, while helpful for smoothing changes and useful for finding creative arrangements in some consolidation configurations, is unable to fundamentally solve the underlying mathematical challenge in this cluster.

The consultants developed a model that can provide the boards of education with some information to help envision the potential for a combined middle school program. The costs to run the existing middle level programs are about \$4.9 million. The projected cost of a model combined middle school program comes in at just under \$3.7 million, providing an economy of scale of some \$1.2 million. Both tuition calculations show a lower cost than the projected \$3.7 million cost of the model combined program.

With regard to district debt, the newly enlarged regional district would simply combine the debts into one lump sum moving forward, unless there are negotiated changes given regionalization rules that allow for it. These districts are unusual in that none of the current Belvidere Cluster districts have any bonded debt. Great Meadows does have debt. Although the existing debt will be retired next year, the district is proposing a referendum vote in March 2025 to fund an \$8.1M project that would replace the retiring debt.

With regard to collective bargaining agreements (CBAs), the analysis intends to provide useful information to aid the negotiations process should the districts decide to form an all purpose regional district, or to be used simply as points for comparison and synthesis in future negotiations. The regionalization law states that the newly formed regional district shall recognize each majority

representative of the existing bargaining units in the largest constituent district as the majority representatives of those separate bargaining units of employees. It notes further that if there is a classification of employees that does not have a CBA in the largest constituent district, the CBA of the next largest would apply. This suggests that Belvidere's CBA would govern staff in all grades after the initial three year period if a successor agreement is not reached in that time.

The CBA analysis addresses similarities and differences among various aspects of the agreement to include expiration dates, recognition clauses, calendars and working conditions, salaries, leaves of absence, tuition reimbursement, and insurance coverages. Each of these areas will need to be carefully examined and cost out during contract negotiations following any potential regionalization.

Most of the districts in this study participate in some shared services already including: administrative, teaching, and support personnel; utilities, insurances, and transportation; food services; facilities and fields; and maintenance, trash, and snow removal. It is obvious that the Belvidere Cluster has worked hard to establish money saving and efficiency enhancing shared services with an array of shared personnel. While some people might assume this sharing of personnel makes sense given the size of a district or geographical proximity, there are other factors to consider. In most cases, shared district staff contend with issues like two different sets of collective bargaining agreements and budgets, twice as many evening meetings, and twice as many compliance activities. This requires a strong commitment on the part of the shared employees, and can be a stressful factor that may contribute to frequent turnover or burnout.

With extensive shared services already in place, finding additional ones will prove challenging if the districts remain in their status quo governance arrangements. One idea would be to create a single, well staffed, regional administrative office, where operations could be centralized. Other suggested areas to look for sharing include directors, special subject teachers, counselors, special education, food services, and staff development.

With regard to transportation, current bus routes and stops from Great Meadows to Hackettstown HS were evaluated to find that buses from Great Meadows to Belvidere HS can be established without major changes. Existing bus stops could be utilized through a newly formed district with its own transportation coordinator. The addition of a single transportation coordinator would provide for a regular evaluation of bus stops, routes, and tiering to enhance and improve busing efficiency. A new all-purpose district might also want to consider purchasing some of its own vehicles and hiring at least some of its own drivers to mitigate having all transportation in the hands of an external contractor.

Having studied and looked at the grades 9-12 picture, another scenario being studied is to have Great Meadows MS host a combined middle school program as part of the district joining with the Belvidere Cluster in an all-purpose regional school district. However, transportation would need to be studied in a more in-depth manner. Certainly, new routes would have to be created and bid out. Absent bidding out exact routes, it would be nearly impossible to make any reasonable cost estimates. Post-pandemic school transportation fees have increased dramatically and remain highly unpredictable.

The additional cost to the districts to have the middle school program located in Belvidere HS is likely \$0, because the districts are already transporting their grades 9-12 students there and assumes a comparable bell schedule. The middle school students could be added to the 54 passenger buses that are currently contracted at little to no additional cost. Housing the middle school program in White ES is estimated to cost an additional \$280,000. There could be a slight savings in the cost of transporting the middle grades students in White should the program be housed at White ES. From a transportation perspective, the recommendation is to locate the middle school program at the Belvidere HS/ES site.

In the closing Belvidere HS scenario, transportation would actually improve for Harmony and Hope, if their high school students attended the closest high schools, Phillipsburg HS and North Warren Regional HS, respectively. White's and Belvidere's commutes to the nearest high school, Warren Hills Regional, would be more than double the distance for White and an entirely new expense for Belvidere, which currently does not bus its students, except for those going to the technical school. Great Meadows would see no change by staying in its send-receive relationship with Hackettstown.

The study suggests that, apart from savings due to economies of scale in purchasing or personnel, meal programs would not be significantly impacted by a pK-12 regionalization. Some of the districts in the current Belvidere Cluster are finding it difficult to sustain financially successful food service programs. Whether or not regionalization occurs, it would be worth the districts exploring sharing a food service management company and, specifically, a director of food services. There should also be some potential savings due to economies of scale in purchasing and/or personnel.

Tuition would cease to exist for all intents and purposes in an all purpose, regional school district. If the Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White districts chose to create a combined middle school experience for all students in grades 6-8 at the Belvidere site, the existing send-receive agreements with Belvidere could be expanded to include those middle school students in addition to the grades 9 through 12 students. A consideration, especially for Harmony and Hope, is that if their grades 6-8 students are sent to Belvidere, it will leave their schools with student enrollments of approximately 125 and 90, respectively. Since small districts struggle with balancing revenues and spending efficiently given lower economies of scale, reducing school enrollments may exacerbate this issue.

In the closing Belvidere HS scenario, it is impossible to accurately project possible receiving high school tuition absent extensive examination of those potential receiving districts, which is beyond the scope of this study. If one assumes similar tuition rates among the districts, Harmony, Hope, and White would pay largely what they currently pay Belvidere to another receiving high school district. Belvidere's situation is complicated by having a similar need to pay tuition to a receiving high school district, which is not currently the case, while losing the tuition revenue from the current cluster. That should be offset largely by cost reductions of educational resources currently allocated.

The classroom availability data demonstrates that the Belvidere Cluster schools have a wide variety in terms of physical capacities. An all-purpose, regional school district would have greater flexibility to assign students and grade levels as needed to more effectively and efficiently use available classroom spaces. With anywhere from a projected 11 to 13 classrooms available over the next five years,

Belvidere HS is the only school in the current cluster with sufficient capacity to consider housing an expanded send-receive middle school program.

Great Meadows would have the capacity to house a regional grades 6-8 middle school at Great Meadows MS. This would require the district to reopen Liberty Township School, which closed to school operations at the end of the 2018-19 school year but has been maintained. The district is currently embarking on grant-funded projects to get Liberty Township School ready for students once there is a reason to open it.

Another opportunity given the facilities analysis is to consider expansion of the preschool programs at the schools with capacity. Great Meadows has a realistic pK universe of 126 children and a projected pK enrollment in 2024-25 of 23 students in two classrooms. Work is underway at Liberty Township School to make five classrooms preschool compliant, so that school and/or Central ES may be able to serve its entire pK universe and, based on preschool enrollment, perhaps grades K, 1, and/or 2 as well.

The realistic pK universe for the Belvidere Cluster is approximately 135 children, and serving that population would require as many as 10 total classrooms. The four elementary schools have a projected pK enrollment of 86 students in 7 classrooms in 2024-25. With 15 projected classrooms available in 2024-25 (Hope 1, White, 6, and Harmony 8), these districts could meet their entire universe of pK students, especially given the appropriate state funding to do so. Given the room availability at Belvidere HS, Belvidere could shift grades 7-8 students there, potentially opening classrooms for preschool expansion at all the elementary schools.

An all-purpose, regional school district also would be able to consider consolidating preschool programs into one central location in a newly built or leased space that could accommodate a greater percentage of potential pK students. This would also free up existing classrooms for expanding other elementary and secondary programs.

Findings and Recommendations

This feasibility study considered perspectives from governance and law, demography, education and program, and finance and operations. After analysis of the data gathered in each of these domains, the consultants have produced findings and urge the boards of education of the Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows school districts to consider the recommendations offered. Note: Any referendum or vote to regionalize which does not include the options as designed for this study would completely change the analyses and findings produced herein.

According to this study, an all purpose regionalization of the five participating districts, or a consolidation of just the Belvidere Cluster districts, would provide multiple opportunities for a more effective and efficient educational program. While there are expected to be cost savings and potential operational benefits, the investigation provided evidence that either consolidation scenario would be somewhat less beneficial from a tax apportionment perspective than the status quo, although this could be moderated using the ten-year transitional apportionment method. The state aid analysis led to uncertain conclusions about its impact on a new regional district that will need to be addressed either

through State administrative interpretation or legislative amendment to the current law. At best, this would produce a “hold harmless” impact on state aid. Therefore, the consultants **recommend that consideration of an all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district either with or without Great Meadows be postponed until the aforementioned state aid issue is either clarified or amended.**

The consultants **recommend that the boards of education strongly consider further investigation of a combined grades 6-8 middle school program for the Belvidere Cluster districts at the Belvidere HS/ES site.** The educational benefits of such a program have been identified in many places in this report. There would be no impact from a tax levy or state aid perspective, and a projected cost decrease from the tradeoff of each district’s reduction in personnel and instructional resources dedicated to those students versus additional tuition from Harmony, Hope, and White to send their grades 6-8 students to Belvidere. A consideration, especially for Harmony and Hope, is that if their grades 6-8 students are sent to Belvidere, it will leave their schools with student enrollments of approximately 125 and 90, respectively. Since small districts struggle with balancing revenues and spending efficiently given lower economies of scale, reducing school enrollments may exacerbate this issue.

Based on the analysis herein, the consultants also **do not recommend the closing of Belvidere High School** at this time. Evidence was provided on the rich pride and traditions of the school community as well as the strong curricular, extracurricular, and support programs provided by the district. While the concern about small enrollment remains, the demographic projections identify an upward trend in high school student numbers over the next several years. Cost savings would not be expected as new high school tuition for Belvidere grades 9-12 students would mostly wipe out any salary and benefit savings from downsizing high school staff.

INTRODUCTION

Study Purpose

The School Regionalization Efficiency Program (SREP) supports public school districts and governing bodies across New Jersey (NJ) who wish to study the feasibility of school district regionalization and/or consolidation.

P.L.2021, c.402, the act that created the SREP, was signed into law by Governor Murphy on January 18, 2022, after passing both houses of the State Legislature. It created a grant program within the Division of Local Government Services in the Department of Community Affairs, the purpose of which is to provide for the reimbursement of eligible costs associated with conducting feasibility studies that support the creation of meaningful and implementable plans to form or expand regional school districts.

In order to be eligible for a grant, applicant boards of education or certain municipal governing bodies are required to meet criteria, namely that the proposed regionalization:

- does not increase or exacerbate the segregation of students enrolled in the school districts seeking to consolidate or, as applicable, in the school districts from which a school district is seeking to withdraw by racial, socio-economic, ability, or English language learner status;
- to the maximum extent practicable, will lead to the establishment of a limited purpose or all purpose regional school district;
- consolidates school districts that are in close geographic proximity to each other. School districts need not be immediately contiguous as long as the consolidation and any geographic separation is not so large as to contradict the potential for improved efficiency and cost savings;
- possesses the potential for improved efficiency and cost savings;
- possesses the potential to advance an enhanced learning environment for participating districts;
- coordinates curriculum across schools and grades throughout the proposed limited purpose or all purpose regional school district; and
- reflects a documented commitment from the participating districts to make good faith efforts to implement the recommendations of the feasibility study that promote efficiency and quality of education.¹

The purpose of this study is to examine relevant data in order to provide recommendations on the feasibility of consolidating operations to form one all purpose, grades pre-kindergarten (pK) to 12,

¹ P.L.2021, c.402

regional school district or to share services more effectively and efficiently among the boards of education of five school districts: the grades pK-12 Belvidere School District (Belvidere); the grades pK-8 Harmony Township School District (Harmony); the grades pK-8 Hope Township School District (Hope); the grades pK-8 White Township School District (White); and the grades pK-8 Great Meadows Regional School District (Great Meadows).

The study will examine district operations in the following areas, which make up the four major domains of this project: governance and law; demography; education and program; and finance and operations. Each of these considerations must be studied to understand the overall impact of the potential formation of an all purpose, regional school district. The Governance and Law domain focuses on an examination of constitutional, statutory, and case law, board member apportionment, state monitoring status, stakeholder input, transition features, and potential political issues. The Demography domain looks at housing starts, enrollment history and projections, school facility capacities, and the racial and other disaggregated impacts of regionalization. The Education and Program domain examines the curriculum and instructional factors, other instructional resources, performance measures, special services, extracurricular programs, and school and district staffing. The Finance and Operations domain explores operating expenses, state aid and local tax levy projections, debt allocation and borrowing margin, collective bargaining agreements, shared services, contracted services, tuition, and reserves.

Consolidation Options

The boards of education of Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows have expressed an interest in examining the feasibility of reorganizing their school districts or seeking ways in which to expand shared services across their schools and districts. The reorganization options being studied include:

1. Consolidating all school districts into one all purpose, regional school district for students in grades pK-12;
2. Revising existing send-receive agreements, or developing new ones, to send all grades 6-8 students to a combined middle school program;
3. Closing Belvidere High School, reorganizing Belvidere into a pK-8 school district, and having each pK-8 district create a new send-receive relationship with another Warren County high school district for students in grades 9-12; and
4. Maintaining the status quo with opportunities to better align educational programs and support services while reducing or controlling the costs of educating students in each district through the expansion of shared services and other efficiencies.

There are potentially three distinctive focal points of the scenarios noted above which go beyond our standard model. One is the desire of the districts in the first two options to consider the benefits of a middle school program for all 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. Another is to consider the value of

closing Belvidere High School (Belvidere HS), long among the smaller high schools in the state, in response to declining enrollment over time and its effects on educational effectiveness and financial efficiency.

The final unique aspect of this study involves the inclusion of Great Meadows, a regional pK-8 school district, which is a neighboring district but not part of the historic cluster. Great Meadows currently sends, and for many decades has sent, its grades 9-12 students to Hackettstown High School (Hackettstown HS) in the Hackettstown School District (Hackettstown) under a send-receive agreement. Great Meadows officials expressed their interest in studying a regional approach with both Hackettstown and Belvidere. Until very recently, Hackettstown had not signaled an interest in a feasibility study, so the Great Meadows Board of Education decided to engage in this one, which was approved by the NJ Division of Local Government Services.

Note: This study examines the potential impacts of regionalization as outlined above. Any referendum or vote to regionalize that does not include the options as designed for this study would completely change the analysis and findings produced herein. Each scenario will be considered both with and without Great Meadows, given the unusual nature of including a district not part of the existing send-receive cluster.

Consultant Backgrounds

The Sweeney Center for Public Policy and the Rowan University College of Education have teamed up to form the Rowan School Regionalization Institute to assess the impact of the school regionalization law (P.L.2021, c.402), make recommendations on policies to advance regionalization, and conduct regionalization studies for interested districts. As the lead agency, the Belvidere Board of Education retained the Rowan University School Regionalization Institute to prepare this study to address the requirements of its SREP grant.

The Sweeney Center is led by Director Mark Magyar, MLIR, who developed the new regionalization law as policy director for the NJ Senate Majority Office and has met with superintendents and board members from more than three dozen districts to advise them on regionalization issues. The College of Education is represented by David Lindenmuth, Ed.D., Director of Rowan's Institute for Educational Leadership, who served as superintendent of schools in four school districts in Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, and Salem counties.

The Rowan School Regionalization Institute retained the following expert consultants to collaborate on this study:

G. Kennedy Greene, Ed.D., adjunct associate professor in the Department of Education Policy and Social Analysis at Teachers College, Columbia University. He is a former superintendent of schools in Newton (Sussex County) and past president of the NJ Association of School Administrators. Dr. Greene served as the project manager and lead investigator, editing and contributing to all domains of the study with a focus on the Education & Program domain.

Lucille Davy, Esq., attorney, certified K-12 mathematics teacher, and former NJ Commissioner of Education. She developed school regionalization initiatives both as Commissioner and as co-chair of the Legislature's Economic and Fiscal Policy Workgroup. Ms. Davy focused on the Governance & Law and Education & Program domains.

Brian Falkowski, Ed.D., CEO of SBO Management LLC, which provides school business services, facility management, and professional development to client organizations. He has served as a NJ school business official for many years with demonstrated expertise in all areas of school business management. Dr. Falkowski focused on the Finance & Operations domain.

Donna Snyder-DeVita, M.A., consultant with SBO Management LLC, was the Sussex County representative to the N.J. Association of School Business Officials Board, chaired the education committee, and served on many other statewide committees. She served as a NJ school business official for many years with demonstrated expertise in all areas of school business management. Ms. Snyder-DeVita focused on the Finance & Operations domain.

Brian Diamante, co-owner of The Diamante Group LLC, a school data services provider. He has over a decade of education finance experience. Mr. Diamante focused on the Finance & Operations domain.

Scott A. Oswald, Ed.D., adjunct professor in the Colleges of Education at Stockton and Rowan Universities. He is a former shared superintendent of schools in Collingswood and Oaklyn (Camden County), past executive committee member of the NJ Association of School Administrators, and past president of the Camden County Association of School Administrators. Dr. Oswald focused on the Finance & Operations domain as well as overall study editing.

George Sundell, CEO of Sundance Associates, which provides services including facilities planning, demographic analysis, redistricting, community relations and participation programs, and grant writing to public school systems throughout NJ. Mr. Sundell focused on the Demographics domain.

Ray Kuehner, school transportation consultant. He is a former school transportation supervisor and a past president of the NJ School Transportation Supervisors Association. Mr. Kuehner focused on transportation within the Finance & Operations domain.

Arisahi Mora Lázaro, Rowan University graduate student, served as a data research assistant.

GOVERNANCE and LAW

1. Constitutional, Statutory, and Case Law Review

This study examines the options for reorganizing the Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows school districts. Each scenario is addressed separately including a review of the applicable state laws and regulations. This section will come to conclusions about the continuation of analyzing the viability of some of these specific options beyond this point.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (without Great Meadows)

The pK-8 school districts of Harmony, Hope, and White send their grades 9-12 students currently to pK-12 Belvidere on a tuition basis through a send-receive relationship. Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:13-2.a, which requires an all purpose regional district to be organized for all school purposes of the municipalities included within such district, the four districts could join together to form a single new, grades pK-12, regional school district.

The law requires that the proposal to form a regional district be submitted to the voters in each of the municipalities that choose to participate in the referendum.² The proposal to create a new regional district would be adopted if a majority of the votes cast in each of the local districts agreed to form the regional district.³ Conversely, if voters in any one of the communities participating in a referendum voted against creating a new regional district, the proposal would fail.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (with Great Meadows)

Including Great Meadows in the proposal for a new pK-12 regional district is more complicated, since it is already a pK-8 regional district serving the communities of Independence and Liberty Townships with its students in grades 9-12 currently attending Hackettstown HS under a send-receive relationship. N.J.S.A. 18A:38-21 would require Great Meadows to apply to the NJ Commissioner of Education (Commissioner) to withdraw from its agreement with Hackettstown before it could pursue joining with Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White to form a new regional district. A review by the Commissioner would include an analysis of multiple factors including the financial, educational, and potential segregative impacts of terminating the send-receive agreement on both Great Meadows and Hackettstown.⁴ In addition, pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:38-13, Great Meadows would have to prepare and submit a feasibility study to support its request to withdraw from Hackettstown.

Additionally, if Great Meadows filed a petition to withdraw its high school students from Hackettstown, Hackettstown could voice its objections and request a hearing before the Commissioner prior to any decision being made.⁵ Furthermore, the Commissioner's decision could

² N.J.S.A. 18A:13-5

³ N.J.S.A. 18A:13-5.a

⁴ N.J.S.A. 18A:38-21.1

⁵ N.J.S.A. 18A:38-22

be appealed to the State Board of Education by either party if not satisfied with the Commissioner's decision. In short, this process could become lengthy and complex, unless it is clear that the criteria enumerated in N.J.S.A. 18A:38-21.1 can be met and that Hackettstown will not object to Great Meadows' withdrawal of its high school students.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option (without Great Meadows)

This option is being envisioned as the revision of existing send-receive agreements, or the development of new ones. The combining of middle school grades as part of the creation of a new regional district could be considered as part of the all purpose, grades pK-12 scenarios identified previously. The reason for this approach is that the former is accomplished differently than the latter. Still, similar opportunities and challenges that will be presented regarding a combined send-receive middle school program would be present, if an all purpose, regional school district decided to combine its middle school students at one site as well.

If the current Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White districts chose to create a combined middle school experience for all students in grades 6-8, the existing send-receive agreements with Belvidere could be expanded to include those middle school students in addition to the grades 9-12 students. These would be decisions to be considered and made by each board of education and would not be subject to a public referendum, though the board decisions would need Commissioner approval.

New agreements could be written to have students in grades 6-8 attend one of the existing pK-8 districts as well, where White may be a possibility. The option to go to Belvidere would have the added benefit of advancing a fully integrated educational experience for students beginning in the sixth grade instead of ninth grade. The viability of this option will depend upon analyses of enrollments and facilities to determine if Belvidere or White has the capacity necessary to house the cluster's grades 6-8 students, or if not, perhaps grades 7-8 students.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option (with Great Meadows)

This option could have Great Meadows consider entering into a send-receive agreement with Belvidere to educate its students in grades 6-8 assuming that Harmony, Hope, and White modify their existing send-receive agreements with Belvidere to include their sixth through eighth grade students. As the receiving district, Belvidere would determine a per pupil tuition rate that would be paid by Great Meadows in an amount not to exceed the actual cost per pupil as determined under State regulations.⁶

Already a pK-8 regional, Great Meadows would be entering into a send-receive relationship with Belvidere for its students in grades 6-8 while continuing its send-receive relationship with Hackettstown for grades 9 through 12. We doubt the educational and financial desirability of this option, as Great Meadows would be adding another school transition, result in increased transportation costs, and make curricular coordination even more difficult. The district would also need to reduce staffing levels as students were sent to another district. The viability of such an

⁶ N.J.S.A. 18A: 38-19

option would also depend on the above-referenced enrollment and facilities analyses for the Belvidere Cluster, let alone adding Great Meadows' students into the mix.

Another possibility would be for Great Meadows to host the combined middle school program for its own students and those from the Belvidere Cluster. The aforementioned enrollment and facilities analyses will determine whether there is classroom capacity in the current Great Meadows Regional Middle School (Great Meadows MS) to accommodate the Belvidere Cluster's grades 6-8 (or even 7-8) students. Additional capacity may be available by opening the currently closed Liberty Township School, which will be explored to some extent in the facilities analysis. Transportation would undoubtedly be more expensive for the Belvidere Cluster districts in this scenario than in the one involving a middle school program in either Belvidere or White.

As a result of these obstacles, the option for Great Meadows to send middle school students to the Belvidere Cluster or receive them from the Cluster will not be primary considerations in the remainder of this study.

Grades pK-8 Districts with Closing Belvidere HS Option (without Great Meadows)

As will be noted in subsequent sections of this study, there may be valid reasons to consider closing Belvidere HS because of declining enrollments. However, this option presents multiple layers of complication, particularly since it would require each community to find a place to send its high school students and have those receiving districts have the space and be willing to accept additional students. It would also not advance the benefits that would come from a unified pK-12 educational program; in fact, it could even be educationally detrimental to ninth grade students entering different high schools throughout the county. That said, Belvidere would need to obtain approval from the NJ Department of Education (NJDOE) to terminate the send-receive relationships that exist with the Harmony, Hope and White districts⁷ and a public vote by a majority of its voters to close the high school.⁸

Grades pK-8 Districts with Closing Belvidere HS Option (with Great Meadows)

It is difficult to envision any advantage to studying this option, as Great Meadows is a pK-8 district that sends its grades 9-12 students to Hackettstown HS via a longstanding, send-receive relationship. Hackettstown HS is also the closest high school in the county to Great Meadows. As a result, this option will not be considered further in this study.

The possible alternative that could be considered in another study would be if all of the districts (Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows) were pK-8, they might investigate the benefits of creating a single pK-8 regional school district that would serve elementary students in all of the communities, potentially sending all grades 9-12 students to one Warren County high school.

⁷ See description of process to terminate a send-receive relationship in the discussion above of an all purpose regional district with Great Meadows. Terminating those agreements might be viewed more favorably, if the four districts commit to forming one limited-purpose, grades pK-8, regional school district.

⁸ N.J.S.A. 18A:33-2.1

2. Election Process and Board Composition

Number of board members, current apportionment, and projected apportionment

The board of education of a regional district shall consist of nine members unless it consists of more than nine constituent districts.⁹ If there are nine or less constituent districts, the members of the board of education of the regional district shall be apportioned as nearly as possible to the number of each community's inhabitants except that each constituent district shall have at least one member. However, it should be noted that N.J.S.A. 18A:13-34.a provides that "notwithstanding any section of law to the contrary, the boards of education proposing to form a newly created regional school district may by resolution frame and adopt a proposal to calculate and apportion the membership of the board of education of the newly created regional district *other than in accordance with the provisions of N.J.S.A. 18A:13-8,*" provided the Commissioner approves the alternate apportionment (emphasis added).

If the Commissioner determines it is advisable for the regional district to be created, and the proposal to create a regional district is submitted to and adopted by the voters, then the members of the board of education of the newly formed regional district are selected by the executive county superintendent from among the members of the boards of education of each constituent district of the newly created regional district.¹⁰ Those individuals shall serve until the election of the first elected members of the newly created regional district in accordance with the proposed apportionment of members at the annual election to be held in the calendar year first succeeding the year in which the election for the creation of the district was held.¹¹ The method of apportionment need not be approved by the Commissioner.

Both the initial regional board of education and the elected board would be apportioned in the same way. State law requires that the initial terms of the first elected board be staggered, in this case three members elected for three years, three for two years, and three for one year.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (without Great Meadows)

A new regional school district without Great Meadows would have four constituent municipalities and a nine member board. If based on current municipal inhabitants, which we recommend, board membership of this new regional district would be as follows:

⁹ N.J.S.A. 18A:13-8

¹⁰ N.J.S.A. 18A:13-37

¹¹ N.J.S.A. 18A:13-34b.a and b

TABLE 1
 Apportionment of pK-12 Regional Board of Education without Great Meadows

Municipality	Number of Elected BOE Members
White	4
Belvidere	2
Harmony	2
Hope	1

This option would produce a significant alteration from Belvidere’s current board membership of twelve individuals with nine from Belvidere, and one each representing Harmony, Hope, and White Townships.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (with Great Meadows)

A proposed regional district with Great Meadows would have six constituent municipalities and a nine member board of education using the same apportionment method as described above. It would also be a considerable change from the status quo in Belvidere.

TABLE 2
 Apportionment of pK-12 Regional Board of Education with Great Meadows

Municipality	Number of Elected BOE Members
Independence	2
White	2
Liberty	2
Belvidere	1
Harmony	1
Hope	1

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option (without Great Meadows)

The requirements for representation from sending school districts to the boards of education of a receiving district are as follows:

If the pupils of the sending district comprise less than 10 percent of the total enrollment of the pupils in the grades of the receiving district in which the pupils of the sending district will be enrolled, the sending district shall have no representation on the receiving district board of education.

If the pupils of the sending district comprise at least 10 percent of the total enrollment of the pupils in the grades of the receiving district in which the pupils of the sending district will be enrolled, the sending district shall have one representative on the receiving district board of education.

If the total number of pupils of two or more sending districts, which do not qualify for representation under subsection a. of this section, comprise at least 15 percent of the total enrollment of the pupils in the grades of the receiving district in which the pupils of the sending districts will be enrolled, they shall have collectively two representatives on the receiving district board of education. The annual designation of the representatives, in the event more than two districts collectively qualify under this subsection, shall be rotated among the boards of education of the sending districts according to a schedule determined by the joint agreement of the boards.¹²

Again, Belvidere has a twelve member board of education comprising nine Belvidere resident members and one each from Harmony, Hope, and White Townships. According to the statute cited above, adding grades 6-8 as part of expanded send-receive agreements would not change the board composition. If those students were housed in White via new send-receive agreements instead, White would need to alter its board composition by adding one member each from Belvidere and Harmony to become an eleven member board of education. Hope with 37 students in grades 6-8 projected for 2024-25 would be nine students short of the 10% threshold for what would be a projected 460 student enrollment at White.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option (with Great Meadows)

If this option were to be considered despite the lack of desirability previously noted, including Great Meadows in the send-receive middle school would change any board composition regardless of the program's site. If Belvidere or White were the host sites, Great Meadows would have a projected 2024-25 enrollment of 237 students in grades 6-8, enough to qualify for one seat on either board of education. Based on the recommended apportionment, the board member would come from Independence Township given that its inhabitant population exceeds that of Liberty Township.

If the program site was to be Great Meadows, Belvidere would qualify for one board seat by just surpassing 10% of the combined enrollment with 96 Belvidere students out of a total of 947. Neither White (72 students), nor Harmony (69), nor Hope (37) would meet the 10% standard. However, their combined enrollment (178) would come to over 18%, exceeding the 15% standard. This would

¹² N.J.S.A. 18A:38-8.2(a), 8.2(b).

give them two shared board seats to be rotated by the three districts based on mutual agreement. Great Meadows would then have a twelve member board of education.

Grades pK-8 Districts with Closing Belvidere HS Option

From a board composition standpoint, closing Belvidere HS would result in Belvidere returning to a nine member board of education with no representatives from Harmony, Hope, or White.

3. State Monitoring Status

The Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) is NJDOE’s monitoring and district self-evaluation system for public school districts. It is a single comprehensive system that consolidates and incorporates the monitoring requirements of applicable state laws and programs and complements federally required improvements. The system focuses on monitoring and evaluating school districts in five key components that have been identified to be essential factors in effective school districts. These components are Instruction and Program, Fiscal Management, Governance, Operations, and Personnel. A district that achieves a score of 80% or higher in each of these five components is designated as “high performing”.

Belvidere underwent its most recent NJQSAC review during the 2022-23 school year. During that cycle, four of the five areas met or exceeded the standard for a high performing school district: Fiscal Management 96%; Governance 100%; Operations 89%; and Personnel 96%. The district was deemed by NJDOE to need a district improvement plan in Instruction and Program given a score of 79%, one point shy of the high performing standard. It should be noted that this component is highly dependent upon state assessment results.

Harmony has just completed its NJQSAC review for the 2023-24 school year. During that cycle, four of the five areas met or exceeded the standard for a high performing school district: Fiscal Management 100%; Governance 94%; Operations 83%; and Personnel 98%. The district was deemed by NJDOE to need a district improvement plan in Instruction and Program given a score of 74%.

Hope has just completed its NJQSAC review for the 2023-24 school year. During that cycle, the district was designated as high performing, having earned the following scores in each of the five component areas: Instruction and Program 80%; Fiscal Management 96%; Governance 100%; Operations 94%; and Personnel 100%.

White underwent its most recent NJQSAC review during the 2021-22 school year. During that cycle, the district was designated as high performing, having earned the following scores in each of the five component areas: Instruction and Program 86%; Fiscal Management 96%; Governance 100%; Operations 98%; and Personnel 100%.

Great Meadows has just completed its NJQSAC review for the 2023-24 school year. During that cycle, four of the five areas met or exceeded the standard for a high performing school district:

Fiscal Management 96%; Governance 100%; Operations 95%; and Personnel 100%. The district was deemed by NJDOE to need a district improvement plan in Instruction and Program given a score of 76%.

Each district scored admirably in its most recently completed cycles (2021-22 for Hope and White, 2022-23 for Belvidere, 2023-24 for Harmony and Great Meadows) and was deemed high performing in all areas but one in two of the districts. Additional alignment among the districts through a consolidation of the boards of education could aid in strengthening those scores in a more universal manner while reducing the time spent on completing the self evaluation and review. That time may then be redirected toward students, staff, and program development.

4. Stakeholder Input

Steering Committee

Selected board of education members and administrators from Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows were invited to participate in a steering committee to help provide direction, and seek clarification on issues impacting each community. The Steering Committee membership was coordinated by the superintendents.

The Committee met in January 2024 to learn more about the process, review a scope of work including delivery timelines, go step by step through an outline of the study, and identify specific lines of inquiry that would reflect local concerns. Committee members were asked to go back and share information with their respective boards of education and collect any questions and feedback to share with the study team. The Committee met again in August 2024 for a progress update and was presented a draft of the study in January 2025 to review for input on the final product.

Parent, Student, and Staff Surveys

Belvidere HS Student Survey

A survey was given to 10th grade students at Belvidere HS in early October 2024. It asked them to recall their 9th grade experiences related to, among other things, how prepared they were in different subject areas. Students also indicated the school attended in grade 8 so that some of the data could be disaggregated. Thirty-four students responded to the voluntary survey, and a summary of the results is provided below.

ELA

Students were asked whether the reading skills they developed in elementary/middle school prepared them for the reading they were expected to do in 9th grade. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not prepared at all” and 5 being “very well prepared”, almost half of the students said they were very well prepared, the majority of whom had attended Harmony, Hope, and Belvidere schools for 8th grade. Students were also asked how much reading they had to do in any subjects, not just ELA, in grades 7 and 8. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “not much at all” and 5 being

“a lot”, more than half of the students scored it a 2 or 3, while 26% scored it a 4, and 15% scored it a 5. Harmony students reported doing the most reading, with 75% of students scoring it 4 or 5.

When asked how much writing they were expected to do in 7th and 8th grade in English and other classes on the same 1 to 5 scale indicated above, 15% scored it a 2, 29% scored it a 3, 35% scored it a 4, and 21% scored it a 5, though student responses varied depending upon the school attended in 8th grade. The average scores were 3.3 for White, 3.6 for Belvidere, 3.8 for Hope, and 3.9 for Harmony.

Students were also asked how prepared they were to do the writing that was expected of them in 9th grade. Overall, 62% of students scored it a 4 or 5, 20% scored it a 3, and less than 20% scored it a 1 or 2. With an average of 4.5, Hope students reported feeling well prepared. Harmony's average score was 4.0, Belvidere's average was 3.9, and White's was 3.0.

Math

About half of the students who responded took Geometry in 9th grade and half took Algebra I. Most students reported being well prepared for their 9th grade math class, scoring it either 4 or 5. Students were also asked whether they were better prepared, just as prepared, or less prepared than other students in their math class. 62% said they were just as prepared as the other students in their 9th grade Math class, although all students from Hope who responded said they were better prepared. Among all respondents, 26% said they were better prepared and 12% said they were less prepared than other students.

Social Studies

Students were asked whether they had been required to read any books other than their textbook for their 7th or 8th grade Social Studies classes. Almost 40% said they had been required to read other books, while just over 60% said they had not been asked to do any other reading for their Social Studies class, with White having the highest percentage of students saying they were required to read books other than their textbook.

Science

Almost all students took College Prep Biology or Honors Biology in 9th grade. On the same 1 to 5 scale, students were asked how well prepared they were for their 9th grade science class. More than 90% of students responded with a score of 3, 4 or 5, with 75% of students in Belvidere, Harmony and White scoring it 4 or 5. The average score for Hope was 2.75.

Students were asked on a scale of 1 to 5, (with 1 being “hardly ever” and 5 being “all the time”), how often they did labs or science experiments in 7th and 8th grade. Students from White and Harmony reported the highest scores, with an average score of 3.8 and 3.6 respectively. The average score for Belvidere was 3.4 and for Hope it was 2.5.

Insights

The results of the student survey do not point to any one elementary district being demonstrably better than the others in preparing their students for the academic rigors of high school. Each district seems to have its own subject areas of strength. The outcome of importance is that the diversity of preparation does not lead to all students being equally ready in all subject areas. Greater instructional coordination in a regionalized district or a joint middle school program would provide all students with a more common experience.

White Stakeholder Survey

White conducted a stakeholder survey as part of its 2020-24 strategic plan development. The respondents included 55 students, 25 parents, and 11 staff members. The survey asked for open-ended responses on strengths and areas of focus regarding student achievement, learning environment, and partnerships and community involvement. It encouraged the addition of questions or comments relative to the district's quest for continual growth through strategic planning. The survey also asked whether the individual would like to participate in action plan meetings to review the survey results and identify goals and objectives to maximize student potential.

Examples of some of the common responses regarding school strengths are noted below.¹³

Student Achievement

- Teachers are good and they care (s,p)
- New offerings such as SOAR (p)
- More individualized instruction (e)
- Time to address needs of struggling students (e)
- Adequate resources (e)

Learning Environment

- Many students get recognized (s)
- Teachers are caring, very involved and have high expectations (s,p)
- Welcoming to all, especially newcomers (s,p)
- Safe and clean (p,e)
- A more positive atmosphere (p,e)
- Smaller class sizes (p,e)
- Character education program (e)

Partnerships and Community Involvement

- Frequent fundraisers (s)
- PTO activities (s,p,e)
- Good levels of community participation (s,p,e)

¹³ White Township School Strategic Plan Survey Responses, 2020; s = student, p = parent, e = educator

Examples of some of the common responses regarding areas needing attention are noted below.

Student Achievement

- More engaging learning activities (s)
- More discipline for offenders (s)
- More school assemblies (s)
- More elective and academic club opportunities outside of sports (s,p)
- More world language offerings than just Spanish (s,p)
- Better communication with home (p)
- Greater challenges for gifted students (p)
- Rewards and recognition for students at all levels (p)
- Consistent professional development (e)

Learning Environment

- More online work (s)
- Middle schoolers should have lockers (s,p)
- Content with the way things are (s,p,e)
- Enhance device availability and wifi effectiveness (s,p,e)
- Maintain small class sizes (e)

Partnerships and Community Involvement

- Restart the buddy system (s)
- Content with the way things are (s)
- Cliques among parents (p)
- More community related trips and activities (s,p)
- Partnerships with local businesses (p,e)
- Increased parent involvement (e)

Hope Survey of Former Students

Hope conducted a survey of former students as part of its 2022-25 strategic plan data gathering process. There were 87 respondents from the Classes of 1972 through 2024, though not every class was represented. The public presentation provided mostly narrative responses to several key questions, and here are some excerpts:

Did Hope School prepare you for high school and beyond?

- I have so much appreciation for the dedicated and wonderful teachers during my time at Hope School. I felt academically challenged and supported. The social skills and experiences gained were invaluable. As a student, the genuine rapport with teachers made me want to work hard. I learned to ask questions and take ownership of my education. There were actual consequences for not completing assignments or making poor choices. This carried over to life after Hope.

- I had some tough teachers, but in the long run they helped. Our teachers taught us how to speak in front of people. We gained confidence.
- I felt that I was prepared academically for high school. The subject matter and the way the teachers taught their classes were beneficial. I also felt support from each one of them. Our class size was so tiny (16) and it definitely was an adjustment when I went to high school.
- Hope School was always focused on making their students better in every subject. While as kids we didn't like spending the time doing extra work, it paid off in the future.
- I did not feel overwhelmed or anxious entering and throughout my freshman year of high school, which leads me to believe that I was prepared.
- The teachers at Hope School taught me HOW to learn. This foundation helped me to complete all my classes in high school, community college, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and additional certificate programs.
- Hope School gave me the opportunity to not be scared to make friends and to put myself out there.
- When I got to college and saw how many students were struggling with basic computer, writing, and other skills, it really highlighted how well Hope prepared me despite its small size.
- I thought the English, Math, and Social Studies curriculum prepared me for high school. In high school, I felt challenged but never unprepared.
- I have very fond memories of hands-on projects, activities, ways to remember things we learned, study habits, etc. It was always fun, engaging and long lasting.
- I had awesome teachers who were REAL...to the point.
- My teachers at Hope were excellent and always pushed me to do my best.
- Essay writing helped me flourish in my college years. Civics and history allowed me to converse intelligently about a myriad of different issues.
- Yes, I feel the independence I gained during my time at Hope helped to build my determination for learning and my responsibility for myself.

Did Hope School shape your interests or hobbies?

- While resources were limited, I felt that Hope School was able to shape my interests in art and music, especially through band, chorus, and opportunities for creative writing. I think education in the arts is so important. I would encourage Hope School to allow more opportunities for encouraging hobbies and interests related to the outdoors (i.e., exploring nature, gardening). I remember always wishing that we could garden in the plot that existed by the front office.
- I am still an artist! I think the size of Hope was always helpful to get individual attention. The specials periods are a necessity to help students explore other topics. I joined lots of extracurriculars in high school.
- Hope really helped me hone my art and music skills. They were honestly the only two subjects I cared about wholeheartedly, because it's where I thrived. It deepened my love

and talent for art and music. Additionally, I remember having free time to read after lessons were over. I believe many of the classes had little libraries in the classroom, and I grew to be an avid reader.

- Hope School provided extracurricular activities that opened my eyes to more interests.
- Hope was a huge influence in my love of reading, as well as becoming a teacher myself.
- My love of people! They always supported the nerdy kid I was.
- Hope instilled and encouraged my love of reading, as well as creative storytelling.
- Hope School helped me develop leadership skills and a love of reading, even if I sometimes read when I wasn't supposed to read.
- I loved that there were many different classes like art, music, computers, and gym because it helped us be creative and find our true interests.
- Hope allowed me to explore my creative side and also allowed me to work with younger students over the years. I now run a side business based on creative and personalized design and work as a prekindergarten teacher.
- Currently working in a school. Hope Teachers made me realize how influential a teacher can be to his or her students.

Any additional comments, memories, or reflections you would like to share about your time at Hope Township School?

- I made some of my closest friends at Hope School, many of whom I'm still just as close with today. The community of educators at Hope School helped foster those friendships and for that I'm incredibly grateful. Hope School has always felt like home, and I think that says something about the community and culture at Hope School.
- Amazing teachers from kindergarten through 8th grade! Thank you to all those who helped me love learning and learn how to succeed!
- My memories are that I felt safe and had good relationships with the teachers and students. The classes were a little large, but the teachers managed it well. I love what you've done with the place since I left.
- I remember the teachers being invested and committed to our student body.
- I returned to Hope for a couple years to substitute, and the school still had a very lovely atmosphere.
- I miss Hope school so much! Some of my favorite memories are from here including field day and dances.
- The responsibilities we had in 8th grade taught me how to be a better and more productive person.
- Caring, compassionate, understanding and loving teachers. It's no surprise many of my teachers are still here!
- My class was a special class. The majority still talk once in a while. We all had unique gifts that I see now in the world. Blessed to grow up and learn here.
- I am so grateful that I was able to attend Hope School! Having smaller classes compared to bigger schools had such a positive impact on me in so many ways!

- Love the sense of community and family. I'm the third generation to go to Hope School and to Belvidere High School, and I hope one day my kids can go to Hope School.
- Our family has had three generations graduate from Hope School. We all have the best memories from growing up there. We have property available for our children to build homes here, but we have discussed that raising a family in Hope may not be the best idea for their children. Hope just doesn't seem to offer as much as the larger schools.
- Hope, as a town, offered a sense of community that was unmatched back then. Our community supported us through very tough times and we are forever grateful to the staff for their support through it. If our careers were closer to Hope, we would have stayed and our son would have been a student.
- I had a lot of wonderful memories at Hope School. I enjoyed the small class sizes and my 5th and 6th grade group of teachers were always some of my favorites. I loved that I could be myself. Free reading time was my favorite! I think the quality of education I received was a really good one!
- I loved the teachers because I truly felt that they cared for the students. I loved the small classrooms because I felt that there was more time for the teachers and students to interact and completely understand the subject.
- Very personalized instruction, caring and welcoming culture, always promotes kindness and acceptance.
- I am now a current HS teacher and look back and can say that Hope helped lay my foundation for future academic and social success.
- I loved my days and the friendships I made at Hope. At the time, I remember wishing for larger class sizes, but now as an educator and parent I realize how special a small class size setting is. I appreciated being in a place where everyone truly knew my name.

What were some of the challenges you faced at Hope Township School?

- Due to the times and the way our society chose to rule, the school was run by stay at home moms who were able to promote their children as bullies and allow their kids to get away with treating others unfairly, all because their parents were BOE members or class parents.
- While I was at Hope the music program went through about a teacher a year. The lack of consistency and funding for a music program made it difficult for me to enjoy music until high school. In my opinion, the arts were underfunded and sports overfunded.
- As a very small community, Hope School did not offer many extracurricular activities compared to larger schools. Hope School and my experience there impacted my choice of schools as a parent now in choosing private school for my children.
- I feel giving young students more responsibility and volunteer opportunities will help them become more active in their communities as adults.
- Academically, Hope School helped me achieve beyond the standard. However, socially Hope School was not diverse and was not a community that warmly welcomed students who transferred in or were new to living in town.

- While this school housed some wonderful teachers, it also housed an environment that allowed bullying to live and grow. The years of bullying I experienced at Hope School are years that I still experience the impacts of it in my life today. I was failed by administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers. There were teachers and some administration that I now as an adult can see did what they could. I know writing this will change nothing about my time at this school. However, I hope reading about my experience can change the experience of a future child that just wants a friend and someone to stand up for them.

The Hope survey of alumni revealed a generally common theme; most of them had a very positive experience in Hope Elementary School. Many cited small class sizes, great teachers, stimulating academics and activities, and a close knit community feel.

Harmony Parent Survey

Harmony’s Parent Advisory Committee conducted a survey of all parents in the district in August 2023. The goal was to gain insights on school operations using an instrument designed by NJDOE. It served as an introductory activity for the partnership between the committee and the administration. Thirty five parents responded anonymously to the survey. Operations cited as in need of improvement included: overall communication from the district; engagement in decision making processes; awareness of big changes and having a voice in the process; communication from grade level teachers in certain instances; more parent training; and a desire for a school climate survey.¹⁴

Great Meadows Stakeholder Surveys

Great Meadows conducted extensive surveying of students, parents, and staff in the fall of 2023 in both of its buildings: Central Elementary School (Central ES) and Great Meadows MS. Selected responses are noted below.¹⁵

TABLE 3
Parent School Climate Survey Results by Percentage, Central ES (n=50)¹⁶

Survey Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
My child feels safe at school.	28	64	6	2	0
The school environment is clean and in good condition.	28	48	12	8	4
The learning environment is excellent.	28	50	18	4	0
Teachers set high standards for students.	28	56	14	0	2
My child’s teachers encourage students to think independently.	32	60	6	0	2

¹⁴ Parent Advisory Committee Survey Results, September 2023

¹⁵ Key for Tables 3 through 7: SA = strongly agree; A = agree; N = neutral; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree

¹⁶ Central Elementary School Parent School Climate Survey, Fall 2023

My child's academic performance has improved because of the staff.	26	48	22	0	4
I am satisfied with the length of the school day.	24	40	28	6	2
I am satisfied with the extracurricular activities.	12	28	46	14	0
Teachers have built strong relationships with my child.	34	52	10	4	0
Staff encourages students to respect each other's differences.	24	50	26	0	0
Adults treat students with respect.	34	60	6	0	0
Students respect their teachers.	18	58	16	4	4
Students are well-behaved.	8	48	28	8	8
The rules for student conduct are consistently enforced.	20	52	22	4	2
My child has friends at school to trust and talk to about problems.	20	38	38	4	0
I know what my child's teacher expects of my child.	28	54	16	2	0
My child has pride in the school.	18	56	26	0	0
I am well informed about how my child is doing in school.	36	44	14	6	0
Communication with families occurs in an open and respectful manner.	36	38	20	6	0
Parents are involved in making important decisions.	13	13	51	18	5
I am actively involved with the school.	23	31	41	5	0
I feel welcomed in the school.	38	52	8	2	0
Overall, I am satisfied with my child's school.	30	52	10	8	0

In summary, parents who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at an 80% rate or higher that strengths of Central ES are: their child feels safe; teachers set high standards; students are encouraged to think independently; they are satisfied with the length of the day; students are encouraged to respect each other's differences; adults treat students with respect; they know what the teacher expects of their child; they feel well informed; they feel welcomed in the school; and overall they are satisfied with the school. Parents who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at a less than 60% rate on the following items, which may suggest areas for focus: satisfaction with extracurricular activities; student behavior; children having friends to trust and talk to about problems; parents being involved in making important decisions; and parents being actively involved in the school.

TABLE 4
Staff School Climate Survey Results by Percentage, Central ES (n=22)

Survey Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
I feel safe outside on the school grounds.	41	41	9	9	0
I feel safe in the classrooms.	41	46	9	4	0
The school environment is clean and in good condition.	9	27	18	41	5
The school community has high expectations for all students.	18	64	18	0	0
Adults treat students with respect.	32	55	9	4	0
Teachers are treated and respected as educational professionals.	27	46	9	18	0
Parents respect their children’s teachers.	0	55	27	9	9
Students are well behaved.	0	36	27	31	6
The code of conduct is consistently enforced.	9	50	23	18	0
The staff respects and embraces diversity.	14	68	18	0	0
Teachers build strong relationships with students.	32	64	4	0	0
The schedule allows adequate time for teacher collaboration.	9	36	27	23	5
The schedule allows adequate time for teacher preparation.	5	23	36	27	9
I have access to the tools I need to do my job.	9	55	23	13	0
Teachers have close working relationships with each other.	14	59	23	4	0
Administrators and staff communicate with each other effectively.	18	41	18	23	0
Administrators give me useful feedback on my teaching.	14	55	27	4	0
Administrators involve teachers in decision making.	9	46	23	18	4
Parents care about how their child performs.	0	82	14	4	0
Parents are aware of what is expected of their child.	18	59	9	14	0
Parents are actively involved with the school.	9	73	14	4	0
Parents are welcomed in the school.	9	73	18	0	0
The school is a good place for me to work and learn.	27	41	32	0	0

In summary, staff members who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at an 80% rate or higher that strengths of Central ES are: they feel safe both outside and inside the school; there are high expectations for all students; adults treat students with respect; the staff respects and embraces diversity; teachers build strong relationships with students; parents care about how their child

performs; and parents are welcomed and actively involved in the school. Staff members who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at a less than 60% rate on the following items, which may suggest areas for focus: the cleanliness and condition of the school environment; respect for teachers by parents; student behavior; code of conduct enforcement; time for teacher preparation and collaboration; and involvement in decision making.

TABLE 5
Parent School Climate Survey Results by Percentage, Great Meadows MS (n=56)

Survey Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
My child feels safe at school.	25	57	9	5	4
The school environment is clean and in good condition.	18	59	19	4	0
The learning environment is excellent.	5	55	22	14	4
Teachers set high standards for students.	7	41	37	13	2
My child's teachers encourage students to think independently.	5	55	34	4	2
My child's academic performance has improved because of the staff.	2	35	43	18	2
I am satisfied with the length of the school day.	16	55	18	11	0
I am satisfied with the extracurricular activities.	11	32	30	18	9
Teachers have built strong relationships with my child.	9	41	28	18	4
Staff encourages students to respect each other's differences.	12	66	20	2	0
Adults treat students with respect.	12	55	22	9	2
Students respect their teachers.	7	38	37	18	0
Students are well-behaved.	5	30	45	13	7
The rules for student conduct are consistently enforced.	9	50	23	14	4
My child has friends at school to trust and talk to about problems.	38	37	16	5	4
I know what my child's teacher expects of my child.	7	54	23	12	4
My child has pride in the school.	7	60	21	12	0
I am well informed about how my child is doing in school.	11	35	31	19	4
Communication with families occurs in an open and respectful manner.	14	42	28	12	4
Parents are involved in making important decisions.	7	19	14	40	10
I am actively involved with the school.	14	24	38	24	0
I feel welcomed in the school.	21	50	17	12	0

Overall, I am satisfied with my child's school.	7	55	29	7	2
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In summary, parents who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at an 80% rate or higher that strengths of Great Meadows MS are: their child feels safe; and adults treat students with respect. Parents who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at a less than 60% rate on the following items, which may suggest areas for focus: academic standards; academic improvements due to staff; satisfaction with extracurricular activities; teacher-student relationships; student respect for teachers; student behavior; student conduct enforcement; communication; and parents feeling informed, being involved in making important decisions, and being actively involved in the school.

TABLE 6
Staff School Climate Survey Results by Percentage, Great Meadows MS (n=18)

Survey Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
I feel safe outside on the school grounds.	39	39	22	0	0
I feel safe in the classrooms.	39	39	22	0	0
The school environment is clean and in good condition.	11	39	22	22	6
The school community has high expectations for all students.	11	55	17	17	0
Adults treat students with respect.	44	45	11	0	0
Teachers are treated and respected as educational professionals.	17	33	22	22	6
Parents respect their children's teachers.	6	28	44	11	11
Students are well behaved.	6	11	50	22	11
The code of conduct is consistently enforced.	6	33	28	27	6
The staff respects and embraces diversity.	11	78	11	0	0
Teachers build strong relationships with students.	16	67	17	0	0
The schedule allows adequate time for teacher collaboration.	11	27	39	17	6
The schedule allows adequate time for teacher preparation.	11	11	45	22	11
I have access to the tools I need to do my job.	6	50	33	11	0
Teachers have close working relationships with each other.	17	72	0	11	0
Administrators and staff communicate with each other effectively.	17	27	39	11	6
Administrators give me useful feedback on my teaching.	11	50	27	6	6
Administrators involve teachers in decision making.	11	28	44	6	11
Parents care about how their child performs.	6	50	44	0	0

Parents are aware of what is expected of their child.	11	50	28	11	0
Parents are actively involved with the school.	6	33	33	28	0
Parents are welcomed in the school.	17	39	33	11	0
The school is a good place for me to work and learn.	22	55	17	6	0

In summary, staff members who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at an 80% rate or higher that strengths of Great Meadows MS are: adults treat students with respect; the staff respects and embraces diversity; teachers build strong relationships with students; and teachers have close working relationships with each other. Staff members who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at a less than 60% rate on the following items, which may suggest areas for focus: the cleanliness and condition of the school environment; professional treatment of teachers; respect for teachers by parents; student behavior; code of conduct enforcement; time for teacher preparation and collaboration; tools for the job; communication; involvement in decision making; and parents caring about student performance, being aware of expectations, being actively involved in the school, and being welcomed.

TABLE 7
Student School Climate Survey Results by Percentage, Great Meadows MS (n=178)¹⁷

Survey Items	VS	MS	SS	NS	
How safe do you feel outside and around the school?	34	43	20	3	
How safe do you feel in the hallways and bathrooms?	37	38	21	4	
How safe do you feel in your classrooms?	48	36	14	2	
Survey Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
My school is kept clean.	5	28	34	26	7
Most students do their best even when the work is difficult.	8	20	43	21	8
Most students try to do well even when schoolwork is not interesting.	5	32	38	19	6
The length of the school day is about right.	4	30	37	19	10
Students have lots of chances to do after school activities.	22	44	24	4	6
My teachers really care about me.	15	36	33	10	6
My teachers make learning interesting.	8	27	41	15	9
My teachers encourage us to share ideas about what we are studying.	9	48	32	9	2
My teachers notice when I'm doing a good job and let me know.	10	33	36	18	3

¹⁷ Key for Table __: VS = very safe; MS = mostly safe; SS = somewhat safe.

My teacher provides lots of chances to be part of class activities.	12	50	34	4	1
There are clear rules and consequences for behavior.	10	33	31	19	7
Most students are well behaved.	2	25	36	26	11
Students treat each other with respect.	18	47	26	5	4
Teachers treat students with respect.	5	30	46	13	6
Most students are able to work out disagreements with others.	7	28	40	18	7
My parents ask if I've gotten my homework done.	53	33	9	2	3
My family wants me to do well in school.	74	22	3	1	0
Students help decide what goes on in my school.	5	21	39	18	17
I feel like I belong at this school.	12	35	34	10	9

In summary, students who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed (or identified as very safe and mostly safe) at an 80% rate or higher that strengths of Great Meadows MS are: feel safe in classrooms; parent interest in homework; and their families want them to do well in school. Students who completed the survey agreed or strongly agreed at a less than 60% rate on the following items, which may suggest areas for focus: school cleanliness; student effort; length of school day; teachers caring, engaging them in learning, encouraging sharing, and noticing them doing well; student behavior; teacher respect for students; student conflict resolution; student decision input; and student belonging.

Staff Interviews

Members of the study team met with groups of staff members from all five districts on June 8, 2024 at Belvidere HS to obtain information that would be difficult or impossible to obtain in documentary form. Separate meetings were held with superintendents, principals/curriculum coordinators, special education directors, 7th/8th grade teachers, and 9th grade teachers. Responses are shared in various parts of the study, primarily in the Education and Program domain.

5. Transition Features

To guide this study process, Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows established a steering committee that included the superintendents and business administrators from each of the districts. Board members representing each of the school districts were also invited to join the Committee.

This Steering Committee followed a model used in Monmouth County by the Henry Hudson Regional, Highlands, and Atlantic Highlands school districts that guided their successful September 2023 referendum vote to regionalize into a grades pK-12 district effective July 1, 2024. Several

members of the Rowan School Regionalization Institute team were involved in the Henry Hudson initiative.

Members of the Belvidere-Harmony-Hope-White-Great Meadows Steering Committee met periodically with the study team to provide oversight and guidance, coordinate interviews and data collection, and ensure that information was shared with the leadership of all districts on an ongoing basis. The Committee intends to serve as a forum for district representatives to discuss critical interim planning decisions affecting the districts leading up to any potential regionalization vote or any decision to explore additional shared services.

Upon receipt and review of this study, members of the Steering Committee will take a role in presenting the findings at a combined public meeting and potentially at other smaller gatherings. There will be multiple opportunities for the boards to receive feedback and input from all members of the participating communities. The Committee can then discuss the study findings and public responses in order to consider a joint recommendation to their boards on next steps to pursue regionalization or specific shared services.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option

Approval by the various boards of education would be needed to move forward with an application to the state Commissioner of Education for approval to hold a referendum to combine the districts into one all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district. The application would include the specific language to be used on the referendum ballot, including implementation date, cost share, and apportionment of seats on the new regionalized board.

Approval by the Commissioner would need to be received at least sixty days prior to a proposed regionalization vote, which can be held on any of the four specified capital referendum dates in September, December, January, and April, or at the November general election. Under existing state statutes, the creation of an all purpose, regional school district would require the approval of a majority of voters in each of the constituent municipalities that participate in the referendum for their individual school districts to merge into the new regionalized district. It is not known whether the Commissioner would approve a referendum that did not include each school district in an existing cluster. The State would pay the full cost of any special election for school regionalization.

If regionalization is approved, the executive county superintendent would appoint representatives during the following months to an interim regional board to guide the transition to regionalization as detailed earlier in this domain. Transition to a newly regionalized district is generally timed to occur at the beginning of the school fiscal year on July 1 with implementation of a new budget for the regionalized district adopted in accordance with state budget timelines.

As an example, Henry Hudson Regional voters passed their regionalization referendum in late September 2023, and the fully regionalized district began operation on July 1, 2024. This provided nine months for implementation planning. The appointed interim board will continue to serve

through January 1, 2025, when a new board elected by voters in November 2024 will be sworn into office.

If the citizens of Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows vote for regionalization, a similar schedule could be followed, with creation of an interim board that would serve until January 1 following implementation of a July 1 regionalization, as described earlier in this domain of the report.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option

As stated earlier in this domain, the districts could choose to create a combined middle school experience for all students in grades 6-8 by expanding existing send-receive agreements with Belvidere, and/or developing new send-receive agreements with White or Great Meadows. These actions would not be subject to a public referendum, but would be within the authority of the individual boards of education subject to Commissioner approval. In order to have a smooth transition including preparation of facilities to house a combined middle school program, the boards of education would be encouraged to plan carefully and execute a strategy over many months before opening a combined program at the start of a new school year.

Grades pK-8's with Closing Belvidere HS Option

As stated earlier in this domain and as discussed in the next section on potential political issues, this option presents multiple layers of complication. It would require Belvidere to obtain state approval to close a high school and terminate existing send-receive relationships, each community to find a place to send its high school students, and the execution of new send-receive agreements with neighboring high schools. Adding to that complexity would be the significant time required for all of these things to happen in what would undoubtedly be an emotional community environment created by the potential closing of a long-operating high school.

Status Quo with Shared Services

Discussion among district leadership and boards of education, followed by the development and approval of specific contracts, would be necessary to design and adopt shared services between the schools and districts in the region.

Implementation Grants

The Division of Local Government Services, which provided the grant that funded this study, offers implementation grants of up to \$400,000 under the Local Efficiency Achievement Program (LEAP) to cover one-time costs for regionalization and shared services initiatives. Henry Hudson received a \$400,000 LEAP grant to cover its implementation costs. The program has been funded annually, was included in the approved state budget, and is anticipated to be available if a regionalization moves forward here.

Members of the Rowan School Regionalization Institute team could continue to provide expertise through a regionalization planning, referendum, and implementation process, as they did for Henry Hudson Regional.

6. Potential Political Issues

Considering the regionalization of school districts, even ones that have had long standing send-receive relationships, is difficult for any number of reasons. NJ has over a century and a half of history of local school district “home rule”, and municipalities have become very loyal to, and protective of, their elementary schools as hubs for their communities, especially ones without town centers. The elementary superintendents articulated the emotional feelings that exist around Harmony Township’s Huskies, Hope Township’s Panthers, White Township’s Eagles, and Great Meadows Regional’s Jaguars.¹⁸

Recreational athletic teams and youth community organizations are typically populated by the same children that attend elementary school together. Mayors and township council members are often in attendance at board of education meetings. Parent-teacher organizations are distinctly stronger in elementary schools than at the secondary level. Deep community ties can obscure the educational and financial benefits of school district consolidation, and should be honored and considered in a thoughtful manner over extended periods of time.

Along these lines of thinking, one of the specific scenarios requested by the Steering Committee of board representatives, superintendents, and business administrators was to evaluate the potential for closing Belvidere HS, reorganizing Belvidere into a pK-8 school district, and having each pK-8 district seek a new send-receive relationship with another Warren County high school district for students in grades 9-12. This option is being investigated because severe enrollment declines have been a concern in each of the school districts for many years now. Table 8 shows there has been a decrease in enrollment of 40% in the studied districts over the past twenty years.

¹⁸ Staff interviews at Belvidere HS, 7-8-2024

TABLE 8
Student Enrollment History, 2003-04 to 2023-24¹⁹

	2003-04 ²⁰	2008-09 ²¹	2013-14 ²²	2018-19 ²³	2023-24 ²⁴	20 Year % Change
Belvidere HS	548	552	451	420	318	- 42%
Belvidere ES	416	339	287	254	259	- 38%
White ES	440	394	339	267	261	- 41%
Harmony ES	310	318	262	243	184	- 41%
Hope ES	239	213	180	132	135	- 44%
Total Bel Cluster	1953	1816	1519	1316	1157	-41%
Central ES	321	393	229	221	301	-6%
Liberty ES	208	240	287	204	0	-100%
Great Meadows MS	509	326	296	239	349	-31%
Total GM Regional	1038	959	812	664	650	-37%
Total Bel & GM	2991	2775	2331	1980	1807	-40%

It is notable that in 2023-24, Belvidere had the smallest enrollment of any K-12 school district in the State by nearly one hundred students, and Belvidere HS had one of the five smallest traditional high school enrollments in NJ. This is particularly concerning for a high school because student and staff numbers can be too low to efficiently offer a comprehensive educational program that remains attractive to students and families. A fuller analysis of enrollment trends and projections will be done in the domain on Demography. The potential educational impacts will be investigated more extensively in the Education and Program domain.

Closing a high school is not a common practice, and there are several considerations that should be examined in addition to the demographic, educational, and financial impacts. First, closing any school is a difficult decision emotionally, perhaps more so than educationally or financially. High schools typically serve as rallying places for their communities and create a sense of pride in having adolescent students finish secondary education by graduating ready for college, careers, and life. Belvidere HS is no exception, as it has deep traditions serving as the academic, athletic, social, and

¹⁹ NJDOE Fall Enrollment Reports

²⁰ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES K-4, Liberty ES K-4, Great Meadows MS 5-8

²¹ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES K-5, Liberty ES K-5, Great Meadows MS 6-8

²² Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES K-2, Liberty ES 3-5, Great Meadows MS 6-8

²³ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES pK-2, Liberty ES 3-5, Great Meadows MS 6-8

²⁴ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES pK-3, Great Meadows MS 4-8

emotional home for the high school students of these four communities over many decades. It is not recommended that this be pursued unless the communities are convinced that the benefits of doing so decisively outweigh the drawbacks.

Second, the possible new receiving high schools would need to: (a) have the physical capacity to house additional students; and (b) want to accept new students onto their rolls. The former would entail a review of the long range facility plans of each district to compare the functional capacity of the high schools with their present enrollment. The latter is somewhat subjective although the number of students in this case would be few enough not to add significant burdens to the educational program, while providing a potentially important infusion of tuition dollars to the receiving school district.

Third, any closing of a school program, development of new send-receive agreements, and/or termination of other agreements would need to be approved by NJDOE, and specifically the Commissioner of Education. Since new agreements would be desired by both parties, they could stand a better chance of approval. However, such actions are not certainties and would likely take significant time to accomplish.

7. Governance and Legal Impact

Belvidere and the three pK-8 districts that send their grades 9-12 students to Belvidere HS (Harmony, Hope, and White) commissioned this study to review several options for regionalization and/or increased shared services. In addition, pK-8 Great Meadows asked to be included in the study to determine whether joining Belvidere and its sending districts in an all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district was a viable option.

In order to consolidate Belvidere and its sending districts into a single pK-12 district, the districts would have to form a new regional pK-12 district. Should the respective boards of education decide to pursue creation of a new pK-12 regional district, state law requires that the voters of each of the communities will determine whether they support such a change. To move forward with forming a pK-12 regional, a majority of voters in each of the districts involved in a referendum must agree. If any one of the communities rejected such a proposal, the plan for creating a new regional district would fail, and the districts would continue to operate as they currently exist.

Adding Great Meadows to a proposal to form a new pK-12 regional district is more complex and would require Great Meadows to obtain permission from the Commissioner of Education to withdraw from its existing send-receive relationship with Hackettstown to which Great Meadows sends its students in grades 9-12 currently.

Another option would be to expand the existing send-receive relationships between Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White. In this case, the three pK-8 districts would continue to educate their own students in grades pK-5 and send them to Belvidere for grades 6-12, allowing for expanded

middle school education opportunities for all of the students who are now attending Belvidere HS for grades 9-12.

By entering into a send-receive relationship with Belvidere, Great Meadows could send its students in grades 6 to 8 to Belvidere, while continuing to send its high school students to Hackettstown. Great Meadows could also host the region's grades 6-8 students through new send-receive agreements with White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere. These two options are unlikely to be seen as prudent, and will receive less attention in the remainder of the study.

The final option under consideration is the closing of Belvidere HS and restructuring Belvidere into a grades pK-8 district. In this case, each community would have to establish a new send-receive relationship with another district to educate its grades 9-12 students. As discussed previously, closing the existing high school would be complicated and require approval from the State in addition to identifying high schools for all of the students. This option would also frustrate the goal of creating and expanding a more integrated educational experience for all of the students attending these districts.

DEMOGRAPHY

8. Community Profiles

The following section provides information regarding demographic attributes of the municipalities in central Warren County, NJ. They include the Town of Belvidere and the Townships of Harmony, Hope, and White. Also within the study area are Independence and Liberty Townships that together form the Great Meadows Regional School District. These six municipalities are highlighted in the map below.

FIGURE 1
Warren County Municipalities Map Highlighting Study Participants



The tables that follow in this section show changes in selected demographic characteristics in these communities over a period between 2018 and 2022.²⁵

Independence Township

Independence has the largest population of the six communities at 5,479 in 2022 with a total area of 19.98 square miles (51.75 km²). Independence is a constituent member of the grades pK-8 Great Meadows Regional School District, which serves students in grades pK-3 at Central ES and in grades 4-8 at Great Meadows MS. Students in grades 9 through 12 attend Hackettstown HS as part of a tuition-based, send-receive relationship.

²⁵ All selected demographic characteristics come from the American Community Survey, United States Department of the Census, 2023; HI/PI = Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, NA/AK = Native American or Alaskan

TABLE 9
Selected Demographic Characteristics, Independence Township

	2018		2022		Change	% Change
Population	5,488		5,479		-9	-0.2%
Housing Units	2,358		2,382		24	1.0%
Median Age	43.5		45.1		1.6	3.7%
Median Income	\$98,417		\$92,536		-\$5,881	-6.0%
Mean Income	\$112,401		\$109,846		-\$2,555	-2.3%
Race	2018	% Population	2022	% Population	Change	% Change
White	4,566	83.2%	4,607	84.1%	41	0.9%
Black	202	3.7%	63	1.1%	-139	-68.8%
Hispanic	574	10.5%	672	12.3%	98	17.1%
Two or more races	53	1.0%	91	1.7%	38	71.7%
Asian	90	1.6%	46	0.8%	-44	-48.9%
HI/PI & Native/AK	3	0.1%	0	0.0%	-3	0.0%

The population in Independence has been stable overall with a marginal decrease of 9 residents (-0.2%) between 2018 and 2022. This masks some changes in the racial makeup of the community, as there have been significant decreases in the Black (-68.8%, 139 persons) and Asian (-48.9%, 44 persons) communities. This has been accompanied by a 41 person increase in the White population, a 98 person increase in the Hispanic population and a 38 person increase in the Mixed Race population. The median age has increased by 1.6 years to 45.1, and there has been an overall decrease in household income by 6.0% to \$92,536.

White Township

TABLE 10
Selected Demographic Characteristics, White Township

	2018		2022		Change	% Change
Population	4,733		4,635		-98	-2.1%
Housing Units	2,368		2,234		-134	-5.7%
Median Age	57.9		60.1		2.2	3.8%
Median Income	\$61,641		\$56,731		-\$4,910	-8.0%
Mean Income	\$76,261		\$80,810		\$4,549	6.0%
Race	2018	% Population	2022	% Population	Change	% Change
White	4,354	92.0%	4,200	90.6%	-154	-3.5%
Black	120	2.5%	71	1.5%	-49	-40.8%
Hispanic	128	2.7%	281	6.1%	153	119.5%
Two or more races	41	0.9%	41	0.9%	0	0.0%
Asian	90	1.9%	40	0.9%	-50	-55.6%
HI/PI & Native/AK	0	0.0%	2	0.0%	2	0.0%

White spans a total area of 27.90 square miles (3.61 km²). The school district serves students in grades pK-8 at White Township School, and students in grades 9-12 attend Belvidere HS as part of a tuition-based, send-receive relationship.

The population in White decreased by 98 (-2.1%) between 2018 and 2022. Like Independence, there were considerable fluctuations in the racial makeup, though different in nature. There was significant growth in the Hispanic (119.5%, 153 persons) population, and a decrease among the Asian (-55.6%, 50 persons), Black (-40.8%, 49 persons), and White (-3.5%, 154 persons) populations. The median age increased by 2.2 years between 2018 and 2022, while median household incomes decreased by 7.9% over this time span to \$56,731.

Liberty Township

Liberty has a total area of 11.93 square miles (30.89 km²). Like Independence, Liberty is a constituent member of the grades pK-8 Great Meadows Regional School District, which serves students in grades pK-3 at Central ES and in grades 4-8 at Great Meadows MS. Students in grades 9 through 12 attend Hackettstown HS as part of a tuition-based, send-receive relationship.

TABLE 11
Selected Demographic Characteristics, Liberty Township

	2018		2022		Change	% Change
Population	2,839		2,678		-161	-5.7%
Housing Units	1,218		1,136		-82	-6.7%
Median Age	41.5		48.3		6.8	16.4%
Median Income	\$96,500		\$115,139		\$18,639	19.3%
Mean Income	\$112,979		\$153,004		\$40,025	35.4%
Race	2018	% Population	2022	% Population	Change	% Change
White	2,668	94.0%	2,416	90.2%	-252	-9.4%
Black	11	0.4%	51	1.9%	40	363.6%
Hispanic	120	4.2%	103	3.8%	-17	-14.2%
Two or more races	14	0.5%	41	1.5%	27	192.9%
Asian	26	0.9%	67	2.5%	41	157.7%
HI/PI & Native/AK	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

The population in Liberty has decreased by 161 persons (-5.6%) between 2018 and 2022, and the township is experiencing significant racial diversification. Decreases were seen among Whites (-9.5%, 252 persons) and Hispanics (-14.2%, 17 persons). Increases were seen among Blacks (363.6%, from 11 to 40 persons), Asians (from 26 to 41 persons) and Mixed Race (from 14 to 21 persons). The median age increased significantly by 6.8 years between 2018 and 2022, which indicates that families are aging in place. Median household income showed strong growth of 19.3% over the same span up to \$115,139.

Town of Belvidere

Belvidere is a town center with a total area of 1.48 square miles (3.84 km²). The school district serves students in grades pK-8 at Belvidere ES (formerly called the Oxford Street School). Students in grades 9-12 attend school at Belvidere HS, which also receives students from Harmony, Hope, and White.

TABLE 12
Selected Demographic Characteristics, Town of Belvidere

	2018		2022		Change	% Change
Population	2,601		2,532		-69	-2.7%
Housing Units	1,158		1,176		18	1.6%
Median Age	39.2		48.0		8.8	22.5%
Median Income	\$56,208		\$95,861		\$39,653	70.6%
Mean Income	\$69,366		\$96,957		\$27,591	39.8%
Race	2018	% Population	2022	% Population	Change	% Change
White	2,391	91.9%	2,297	90.7%	-94	-3.9%
Black	12	0.5%	7	0.3%	-5	-41.7%
Hispanic	103	4.0%	189	7.5%	86	83.5%
Two or more races	34	1.3%	35	1.4%	1	2.9%
Asian	41	1.6%	0	0.0%	-41	-100.0%
HI/PI & NA/AK	20	0.8%	4	0.2%	-16	0.0%

The population in Belvidere decreased slightly by 69 persons (-2.7%) between 2018 and 2022 to 2,532. However, like the other municipalities, the town is experiencing significant racial diversification. There were population decreases among Whites (-3.9%, 94 persons), Blacks (-41.7%, 5 persons), and Asians, who went from 41 to zero persons. During the same time, the Hispanic population nearly doubled (83.5%, 86 persons). The median age increased significantly by 8.8 years between 2018 and 2022, and median household income also showed strong growth of 70.6% over the same span up to \$95,861.

Harmony Township

Harmony has a total area of 24.13 square miles (62.49 km²). The school district serves students in grades pK-8 at Harmony Township School, and students in grades 9-12 attend Belvidere HS as part of a tuition-based, send-receive relationship.

The population in Harmony decreased by 149 persons (-5.6%) between 2018 and 2022 to 2,506, and the township is experiencing significant racial diversification. The White population decreased by 149 persons (-7.1%) as did the Hispanic population by 56 persons (-82.3%). The Black population went from zero persons to 6 persons, while the Asian population doubled by 79 persons (100.0%). The median age increased by 2.3 years between 2018 and 2022, while the median household income showed slight growth of 0.3% over the same span up to \$91,384.

TABLE 13
Selected Demographic Characteristics, Harmony Township

	2018		2022		Change	% Change
Population	2,655		2,506		-149	-5.6%
Housing Units	1,059		1,022		-37	-3.5%
Median Age	46.0		48.3		2.3	5.0%
Median Income	\$91,098		\$91,384		\$286	0.3%
Mean Income	\$102,101		\$108,560		\$6,459	6.3%
Race	2018	% Population	2022	% Population	Change	% Change
White	2,508	94.5%	2,330	93.0%	-178	-7.1%
Black	0	0.0%	6	0.2%	6	—
Hispanic	68	2.6%	12	0.5%	-56	-82.4%
Two or more races	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Asian	79	3.0%	158	6.3%	79	100.0%
HI/PI & Native/AK	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Hope Township

Hope had the smallest population in 2022 at 1,893 with a total area of 18.29 square miles (47.38 km²). The school district serves students in grades pK-8 at Hope Township School, and students in grades 9-12 attend Belvidere HS as part of a tuition-based, send-receive relationship.

TABLE 14
Selected Demographic Characteristics, Hope Township

	2018		2022		Change	% Change
Population	1,853		1,893		40	2.2%
Housing Units	784		865		81	10.3%
Median Age	49.0		48.4		-0.6	-1.2%
Median Income	\$96,458		\$104,009		\$7,551	7.8%
Mean Income	\$124,055		\$125,020		\$965	0.8%
Race	2018	% Population	2022	% Population	Change	% Change
White	1,738	93.8%	1,624	85.8%	-114	-6.6%
Black	2	0.1%	13	0.7%	11	550.0%
Hispanic	94	5.1%	168	8.9%	74	78.7%
Two or more races	6	0.3%	24	1.3%	18	300.0%
Asian	13	0.7%	59	3.1%	46	353.8%
HI/PI & Native/AK	0	0.0%	5	0.3%	5	—

The population in Hope increased by 40 persons (2.2%) between 2018 and 2022. Like the other communities, Hope is experiencing significant racial diversification. The White population decreased by 114 persons (-6.6%), while there were population increases among Blacks (from 2 to 11 persons), Hispanics (from 94 to 168 persons), Mixed Race (from 6 to 24 persons), and Asians

(from 13 to 46 persons). The median age decreased (0.6 years) between 2018 and 2022, while median household income showed growth of 7.8% over the same span up to \$104,009.

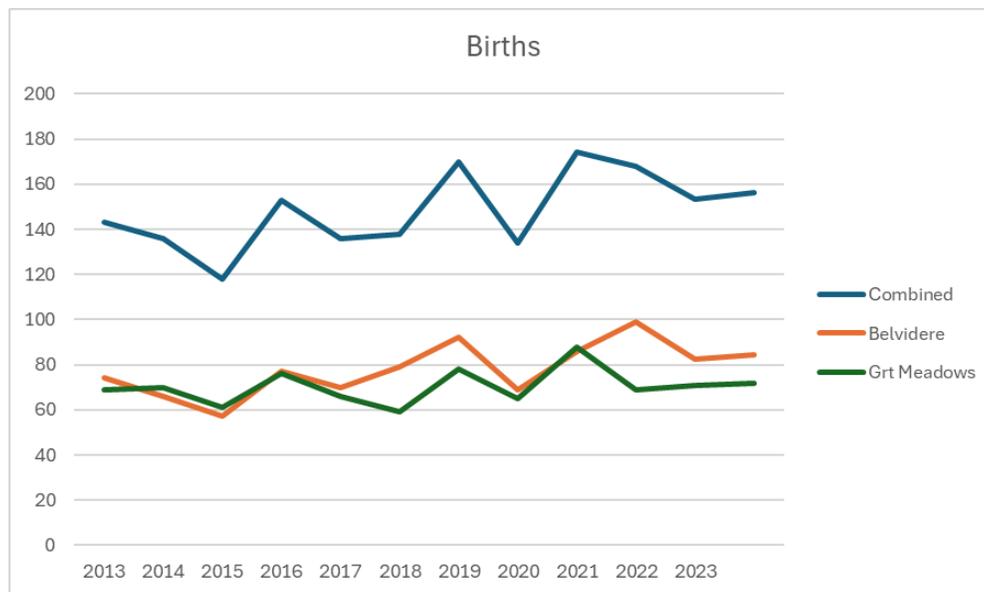
Birth Data

Tracking the number of children born in a municipality is important in demographic studies in order to project kindergarten enrollment over future years by seeing trends over the recent past. The data is also useful in evaluating the relative health of a municipality, as population growth is often the result of a desire by parents and others to move into and stay in a community. Table 15 documents the recent history of live births in the six municipalities.

TABLE 15
Live Births by Municipality, 2013-23²⁶

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 6 yr avg	2023 rolling avg
Belvidere	24	20	22	23	24	23	33	22	18	28	25	25
Harmony	18	19	5	10	13	10	16	14	23	25	17	17
Hope	13	7	9	17	7	17	11	18	11	18	14	15
White	19	20	21	27	26	29	32	15	34	28	27	28
Independence	50	49	43	54	48	43	38	41	48	40	43	42
Liberty	19	21	18	22	18	16	40	24	40	29	28	29
TOTAL	143	136	118	153	136	138	170	134	174	168	153	156

CHART 1
Live Births by Municipality, 2013-23



²⁶ NJ Department of Community Affairs

As shown in Chart 1, births in the Belvidere area have been averaging 83 per year and trending 4+ births each year for the last six years. Births in the Great Meadows area have been averaging 71 per year and trending 2+ births each year for the last six years.

Comparing birth data to total population is one way to look at community health through relative potential for organic growth in a municipality (i.e., at least at replacement level) apart from other factors such as family mobility. Table 16 presents that perspective, showing Liberty and Belvidere having the largest increases in births relative to population in the region, and births in the other communities decreasing significantly relative to population.

TABLE 16
Comparing Live Births to Total Population

	Births 2018	Population 2018	% Births to Population 2018	Births est. 2023	Population 2023	% Births to Population 2023
Belvidere	23	2,601	0.88%	25	2,532	0.98%
Harmony	10	2,655	0.38%	17	2,506	0.70%
Hope	17	1,853	0.92%	15	1,893	0.78%
White	29	4,733	0.61%	28	4,635	0.59%
Total Bel region	79	11,842	0.67%	85	11,566	0.73%
Independence	43	5,488	0.78%	43	5,479	0.78%
Liberty	16	2,839	0.56%	28	2,678	1.04%
Total GM region	69	8,327	0.83%	71	8,157	0.87%
Total Bel & GM	148	20,169	0.73%	155	19,723	0.79%

9. Housing Starts

TABLE 17
Certificates of Occupancy Issued, 2018-23²⁷

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	TOTAL
Belvidere	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Harmony	0	2	2	4	1	2	11
Hope	1	0	0	0	1	1	3
White	1	0	1	2	0	0	4
Total Bel region	2	2	3	6	2	3	18
Independence	2	0	3	0	2	48	55
Liberty	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total GM region	3	0	3	0	2	48	56
Total Bel & GM	5	2	6	6	4	51	74

²⁷ NJ Department of Community Affairs

TABLE 18
Building Permits Issued, 2018-23

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	TOTAL
Belvidere	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Harmony	0	2	2	4	1	2	11
Hope	1	0	0	0	1	1	3
White	1	0	1	2	0	0	4
Total Bel region	2	2	3	6	2	3	18
Independence	1	0	3	1	76	0	81
Liberty	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total GM region	1	0	3	1	76	1	82
Total Bel & GM	4	8	16	19	100	16	163

Another factor that impacts enrollment is new housing construction which may be coming into a community. Tables 17 and 18 look at recent certificates of occupancy and building permits issued by each municipality. The data indicate that there are no planned major housing developments in any of the six municipalities that might impact school enrollment at this time.

The tables above comport with the level of increases in population in each of the communities. Permitting averages 27 units per year. As a percentage of the total units in each community, these are marginal increases in housing with either approval for construction or those for which certificates of occupancy have been issued. In the period from 2018-23, 163 building permits were issued and a single 76-unit multi-family project in Independence Township accounted for 46% of the total. Only 74 (45%) of the building permits were followed by occupancy permits, about 12 units per year. Only Independence experienced housing development that was unusual, in the form of a single 43-unit multi-family development that was occupied in 2023.

10. Enrollment History

Table 19 shows the combined enrollment history for each of the school districts in this cluster. The purpose of this table is to calculate combined average migration ratios in order to project the total enrollment in a potential pK-12 regional school district.

The enrollment history in the Belvidere Cluster from 2018 to 2024 shows overall decreases of 13.7% from 1,316 to 1,157 students. That said, the total enrollment for the cluster of school districts has been stable over the most recent four years. This data is used to calculate combined average survival ratios to project the total enrollment for a potential pK-12 regional school district. The average migration ratios across grades K-12 indicate that the number of students transitioning from one grade level to the next is 0.97, a slightly decreasing but relatively consistent flow of students through the school system.

TABLE 19
Enrollment History, Belvidere Cluster, 2018-24²⁸

2018-19	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
Belvidere	24	27	20	37	24	24	23	41	23	30	97	95	105	120	155	94	417	5	3	674
Harmony	18	21	25	21	25	18	34	21	31	24					144	76	0	1	22	243
Hope	13	12	15	12	15	12	12	10	20	16					78	46	0	2	6	132
White	19	22	23	27	27	26	26	31	28	38					151	97	0	1	18	267
TOTAL	74	82	83	97	91	80	95	103	102	108	97	95	105	120	528	313	417	9	49	1316
2019-20	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
Belvidere	20	11	30	21	35	23	25	26	46	25	89	92	88	106	145	97	375	5	27	649
Harmony	19	24	21	24	21	24	19	36	23	31					133	90	0	3	14	240
Hope	7	13	12	14	11	13	11	14	11	19					74	44	0	4	3	125
White	20	25	25	25	30	28	28	30	33	29					161	92	0	0	20	273
TOTAL	66	73	88	84	97	88	83	106	113	104	89	92	88	106	513	323	375	12	64	1287
2020-21	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
Belvidere	22	19	12	26	22	35	23	26	27	41	86	94	95	89	137	94	364	10	23	628
Harmony	5	16	22	20	26	22	23	19	33	22					129	74	0	0	6	209
Hope	9	8	16	10	16	10	10	10	13	10					70	33	0	4	8	115
White	21	24	21	23	22	25	26	25	27	31					141	83	0	0	15	239
TOTAL	57	67	71	79	86	92	82	80	100	104	86	94	95	89	477	284	364	14	52	1191
2021-22	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
Belvidere	23	19	18	13	21	22	34	25	23	28	77	90	93	95	127	76	355	11	25	594
Harmony	10	14	13	19	22	25	20	22	20	28					113	70	0	2	14	199
Hope	17	11	10	16	11	17	9	10	10	14					74	34	0	6	14	128
White	27	30	21	24	24	21	21	30	27	30					141	87	0	0	24	252
TOTAL	77	74	62	72	78	85	84	87	80	100	77	90	93	95	455	267	355	19	77	1173
2022-23	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
Belvidere	24	15	18	22	14	21	26	35	29	24	84	79	84	96	116	88	343	15	40	602
Harmony	13	18	15	13	19	20	27	16	23	20					112	59	0	2	14	187
Hope	7	10	14	10	13	15	16	10	10	14					78	34	0	7	12	131
White	26	35	32	23	23	25	22	24	31	28					160	83	0	0	22	265
TOTAL	70	78	79	68	69	81	91	85	93	86	84	79	84	96	466	264	343	24	88	1185
2023-24	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
Belvidere	23	16	17	18	22	16	24	28	40	28	65	84	80	83	113	96	312	14	42	577
Harmony	10	11	18	15	14	19	22	30	17	20					99	67	0	2	16	184
Hope	17	15	12	16	13	15	12	15	9	11					83	35	0	6	11	135
White	29	31	30	30	23	21	24	20	26	31					159	77	0	0	25	261
TOTAL	79	73	77	79	72	71	82	93	92	90	65	84	80	454		275	312	22	94	1157
Average S/R	1.065	1.005	1.004	1.006	0.994	0.993	1.035	1.038	0.997	0.797	1.017	0.977	0.810							

This overall migration ratio masks a noticeable drop to .797 from grades 8 to 9 as students enter high school. There are a significant number of 8th grade families choosing to send their students to secondary school options other than Belvidere HS, particularly the nearby Warren County Technical School.

²⁸ NJDOE's Standards Measurement and Resource for Teaching (NJSMART); SC = self-contained special education students

TABLE 20
Enrollment History, Great Meadows, 2018-24²⁹

Year	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
2018-19	69	65	58	67	64	68	70	62	91	81	92	85	95	84	392	234	356	17	25	1024
2019-20	70	62	63	62	71	54	65	61	65	90	73	85	79	91	377	216	328	22	23	966
2020-21	61	61	61	65	68	69	55	67	65	65	88	68	84	76	379	197	316	22	21	935
2021-22	76	71	64	66	66	69	65	58	69	70	76	71	69	75	401	197	291	20	26	935
2022-23	66	67	74	60	64	71	72	72	57	68	58	73	69	65	408	197	265	20	25	915
2023-24	59	70	63	77	59	69	71	73	70	56	70	60	76	73	409	199	279	23	27	937
Avg S/R	0.994	0.997	1.032	1.025	0.997	0.997	0.992	1.016	1.020	1.007	0.982	0.931	0.990	0.962						

The enrollment history in Great Meadows from 2018 to 2024 shows overall decreases of 9.3% from 1,024 to 937 students. The average migration ratios across grades K-12 indicate that the number of students transitioning from one grade level to the next is 1.00, which denotes a stable flow of students through the school system.

11. Enrollment Projections

This study used a modified cohort survival model for enrollment projections. A cohort model tracks students as they move from grade to grade and develops growth ratios between grade levels. For example, if there are 100 students in grade one in a given year and in the next year when these students become second graders the number increases to 104, that would be a growth rate of 4% or a cohort survival ratio of 1.04. This growth/decline ratio between years and grades is calculated for six years of enrollment providing five growth/decline ratios for each grade to grade and year to year change. The average of the five ratios between each grade then serves as the multiplier for future growth between each grade. If the average ratio is 1.2 and the last historical year for grade one enrollment is 100, then the projection for the next second grade would be 120 students. This averaged, grade to grade, survival ratio is applied to all grade levels for the next five years to complete the five-year projection.

The kindergarten ratio is projected generally by calculating the difference between live births attributable to a community and student enrollment in kindergarten five years later. A six-year average was used for the live births to kindergarten ratio in the fifth year of the projection (2028-2029) when those births five years earlier (2023) were not yet available in the data.

Preschool Considerations

The districts have expressed some desire to consider a more inclusive preschool program in an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district. The State uses ninety percent of twice the

²⁹ Grades 9-12 attend Hackettstown HS; data from Great Meadows student information system, numbers of self-contained high school students were estimated and have a negligible impact on overall enrollment predictions

number of students in grade one to estimate a “realistic” universe of pK students. This is considered realistic, because parents are not required to enroll their children in district sponsored preschool. Some will make the decision to keep their three- and four-year old children at home, while others may send them to private options.

The total number of students in grade one in the Belvidere Cluster during the 2023-24 school year was 77, and for the same year in grade one in Great Meadows was 63. This indicates a realistic pK universe of approximately 139 in the Belvidere Cluster and 113 in Great Meadows.

At the state maximum of 15 students per classroom (and lower if some students have a need for a more self-contained environment), serving that population would require as many as 10 pK classrooms in the Belvidere Cluster and 8 pK classrooms in Great Meadows. There is more detail on the educational value of early childhood education in the Education and Program domain and analysis about classroom availability in the Finance and Operations domain.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (without Great Meadows)

TABLE 21
Enrollment Projections, Belvidere Cluster, 2024-25 to 2028-29³⁰

Year	Births	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	K-12	SC	pK	Total
2024-25	92	101	75	78	80	72	70	85	96	93	78	66	82	64	476	274	291	1041	16	86	1143
2025-26	69	77	102	76	79	80	71	72	88	96	112	80	65	66	485	257	323	1064	17	103	1184
2026-27	86	103	80	103	77	78	78	74	75	88	84	114	78	52	519	237	328	1085	16	107	1208
2027-28	99	114	102	80	104	77	77	81	77	75	77	86	112	63	555	233	338	1126	17	118	1260
2028-29	83	93	116	103	82	104	75	80	84	78	55	79	84	90	572	242	308	1121	17	96	1234

Table 21 projects future enrollments of the combined districts of Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White from 2024-25 to 2028-29. A comparison of the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 1,157 students with the 2028-29 projection of 1,234 shows an increase of 77 students with a material averaged change of approximately 5.5 students per grade over fourteen grade levels. An enlargement of the current four district cluster into an all-purpose regional district would not alter the overall enrollment projections in any way.

When examining the enrollment projections separately by elementary and secondary school levels, the grades K-8 elementary school enrollment is projected to gradually increase by 72 students over the next five years (7 students per grade). Table 22 and Chart 2 show the Belvidere Cluster elementary projections over the next five years, where enrollment peaks in 2028-29 at 923 students with a growth of 74 students.

³⁰ Enrollment projection sums can have minimal rounding errors, which do not alter the projections in any meaningful way

TABLE 22
Enrollment Projections, Grades pK-8, Belvidere Cluster, 2024-25 to 2028-29

2024-25	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	K-5	6-8	SC	PK	Total
Belvidere	26	17	18	18	22	17	26	30	40	117	96	7	42	262
Harmony	25	11	17	16	14	19	22	31	16	102	69	1	14	186
Hope	12	18	12	17	14	13	12	15	10	86	37	5	18	145
White	38	30	31	30	22	20	25	21	27	171	72	0	12	255
TOTAL	101	75	78	80	72	70	85	96	93	476	274	13	86	849
2025-26	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	K-5	6-8	SC	PK	Total
Belvidere	17	27	17	17	18	24	18	28	30	121	76	6	42	245
Harmony	22	24	10	18	15	14	19	22	29	104	71	2	23	200
Hope	20	14	18	12	18	12	13	12	16	94	42	6	11	153
White	18	36	31	31	29	21	21	26	21	165	69	0	27	261
TOTAL	77	102	76	79	80	71	72	88	96	485	257	14	103	858
2026-27	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	K-5	6-8	SC	PK	Total
Belvidere	14	18	28	17	18	19	26	20	28	114	73	6	42	235
Harmony	36	21	23	11	18	16	14	20	21	125	54	1	25	205
Hope	12	24	14	18	13	16	12	13	13	97	39	6	18	160
White	40	17	37	31	30	28	22	22	27	182	71	0	22	276
TOTAL	103	80	103	77	78	78	74	75	88	519	237	13	107	876
2027-28	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	K-5	6-8	SC	PK	Total
Belvidere	22	15	19	27	17	19	21	27	20	119	68	6	42	235
Harmony	40	35	20	24	10	18	15	14	18	148	48	1	23	220
Hope	20	14	23	15	20	12	16	12	14	104	42	7	20	173
White	33	38	18	37	29	29	29	23	23	184	75	0	21	280
TOTAL	114	102	80	104	77	77	81	77	75	555	233	14	106	908
2028-29	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	K-5	6-8	SC	PK	Total
Belvidere	19	23	15	18	28	19	20	22	28	122	70	6	42	240
Harmony	27	38	33	21	24	11	18	16	13	154	47	1	16	218
Hope	15	24	14	25	16	17	12	16	13	111	41	7	16	175
White	32	32	40	17	36	28	30	30	24	185	84	0	21	290
TOTAL	93	116	103	82	104	75	80	84	78	572	242	14	95	923

CHART 2

Enrollment Projections, Grades pK-8, Belvidere Cluster, 2024-25 to 2028-29

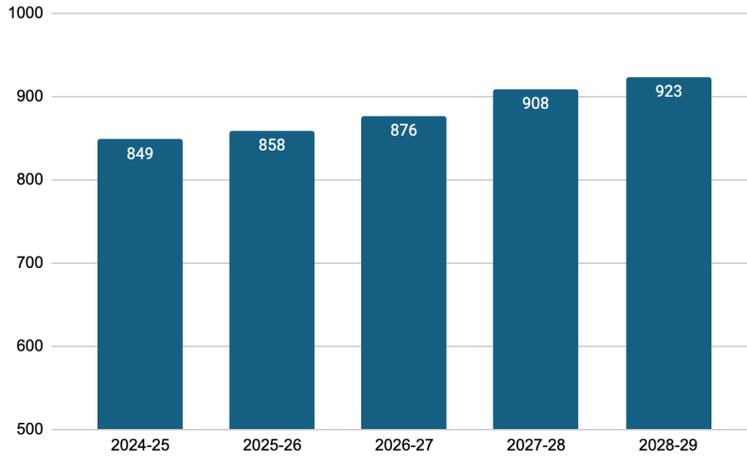


TABLE 23

Enrollment Projections, Grades 9-12, Belvidere Cluster, 2024-25 to 2028-29

Year	9	10	11	12	9-12	SC	Total
2024-25	78	66	82	64	291	3	294
2025-26	112	80	65	66	323	3	326
2026-27	84	114	78	52	328	3	331
2027-28	77	86	112	63	338	3	341
2028-29	55	79	84	90	308	3	311

CHART 3

Enrollment Projections, Grades 9-12, Belvidere Cluster, 2024-25 to 2028-29

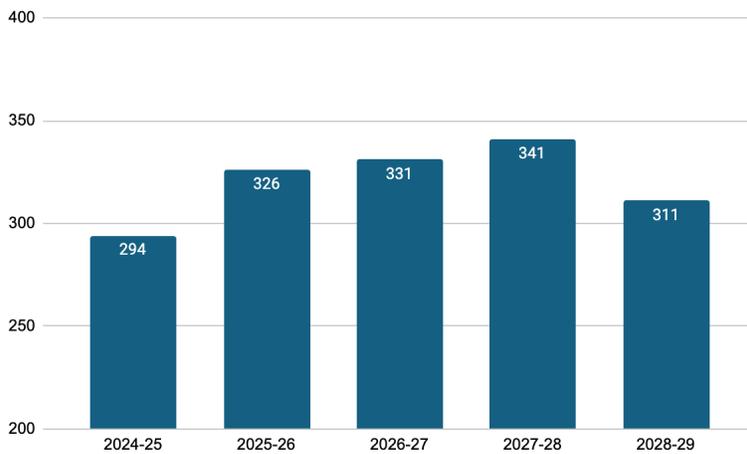


Table 23 and Chart 3 provide the same enrollment projection breakdown for Belvidere HS. In contrast to the elementary trends, the grades 9-12 secondary school enrollment is expected to increase by only 17 students (4+ per grade), peaking at 341 in 2027-28 before decreasing and ending the period with 311 in 2028-29.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (with Great Meadows)

The all purpose option with Great Meadows will be investigated by looking at the overall projections as was done for the Belvidere Cluster. Again, the data will be broken down by elementary and secondary grade levels to examine disaggregated trends over time.

TABLE 24
Enrollment Projections, Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
2024-25	78	70	65	79	59	68	72	74	70	55	65	59	73	419	217	253	21	23	932
2025-26	65	77	72	67	79	58	70	74	75	69	51	64	57	418	218	242	21	30	929
2026-27	87	64	80	74	66	78	59	71	74	74	64	51	62	450	204	251	22	24	950
2027-28	69	87	66	82	74	66	79	60	71	73	68	64	49	444	211	254	22	31	961
2028-29	70	68	90	68	82	73	67	81	61	70	60	76	73	451	209	279	22	16	977

CHART 4
Enrollment Projections, Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

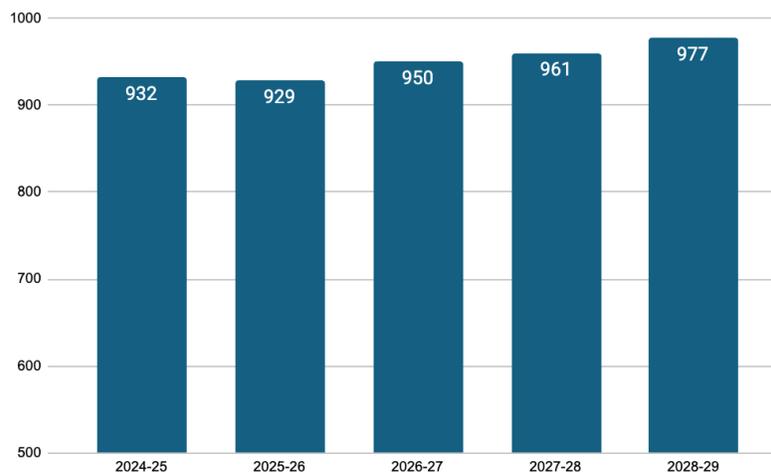
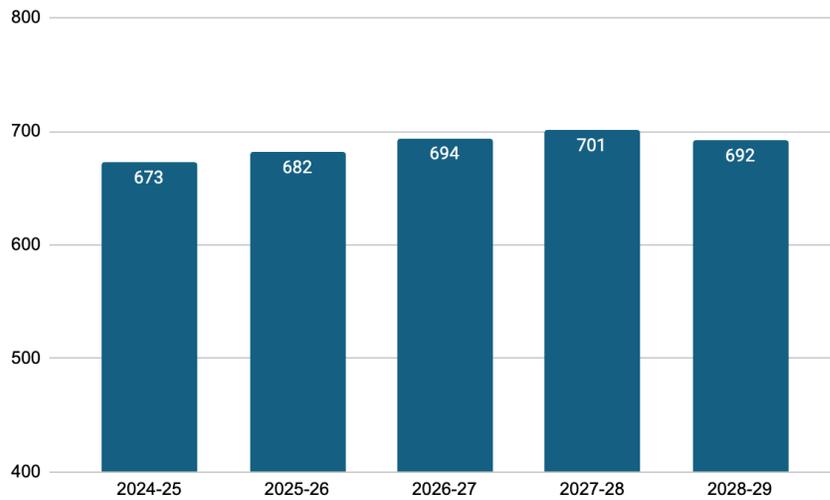


Table 24 and Chart 4 project future enrollments for Great Meadows from 2024-25 to 2028-29. A comparison of the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 937 students with the 2028-29 projection of 977 shows a marginal increase of 40 students with a material averaged change of just under three students per grade over fourteen grade levels.

TABLE 25
Enrollment Projections, Grades pK-8, Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	K-5	6-8	SC	PK	Total
2024-25	78	70	65	79	59	68	72	74	70	419	217	15	23	673
2025-26	65	77	72	67	79	58	70	74	75	418	218	16	30	682
2026-27	87	64	80	74	66	78	59	71	74	450	204	16	24	694
2027-28	69	87	66	82	74	66	79	60	71	444	211	16	31	701
2028-29	70	68	90	68	82	73	67	81	61	451	209	16	16	692

CHART 5
Enrollment Projections, Grades pK-8, Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29



Great Meadows’ elementary enrollment increases minimally across the period by 19 students (2+ per grade) peaking in 2027-28 at 701 students before moving back to 692 in 2028-29. High school enrollment below shows an increase by 26 students (6+ per grade) up to a high of 285 in 2028-29.

TABLE 26
Enrollment Projections, Grades 9-12, Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

Year	9	10	11	12	9-12	SC	Total
2024-25	55	65	59	73	253	6	259
2025-26	69	51	64	57	242	5	247
2026-27	74	64	51	62	251	6	257
2027-28	73	68	64	49	254	6	260
2028-29	70	60	76	73	279	6	285

CHART 6
Enrollment Projections, Grades 9-12, Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

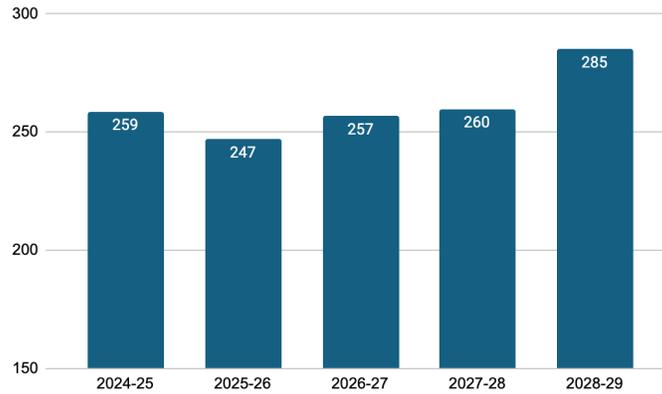


Table 27 and Chart 7 combine the enrollment projections into a full regionalization for Great Meadows, Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White with more than 2,000 students in 2024-25 and growing across the projection window.

TABLE 27
Enrollment Projections, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	K-5	6-8	9-12	SC	pK	Total
2024-25	179	145	143	159	131	138	157	171	163	133	131	142	138	894	491	544	38	108	2075
2025-26	142	179	148	146	159	130	142	162	171	182	131	129	123	902	475	565	38	133	2113
2026-27	190	144	183	151	145	156	133	145	163	158	179	129	114	969	441	579	38	131	2159
2027-28	183	190	146	186	150	143	160	137	146	150	154	176	112	998	444	591	39	148	2221
2028-29	163	185	193	150	185	148	147	165	139	125	139	160	163	1023	450	587	39	112	2212

CHART 7
Enrollment Projections, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

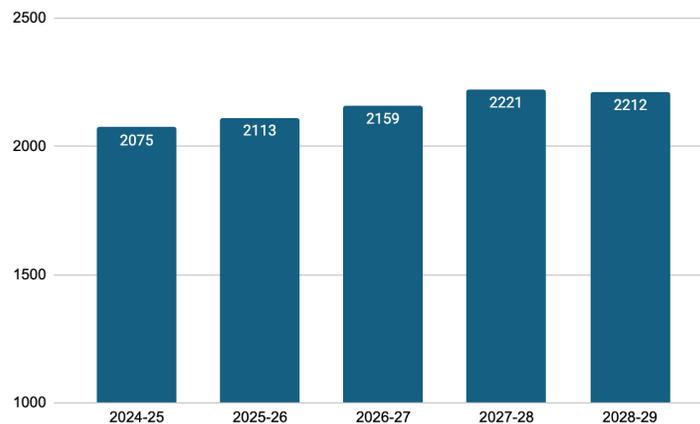


TABLE 28

Enrollment Projections, Grades pK-8, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

Year	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	K-5	6-8	SC	PK	Total
2024-25	179	145	143	159	131	138	157	171	163	894	491	28	108	1521
2025-26	142	179	148	146	159	130	142	162	171	902	475	30	133	1540
2026-27	190	144	183	151	145	156	133	145	163	969	441	29	131	1570
2027-28	183	190	146	186	150	143	160	137	146	998	444	30	148	1621
2028-29	163	185	193	150	185	148	147	165	139	1023	450	30	112	1616

CHART 8

Enrollment Projections, Grades pK-8, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

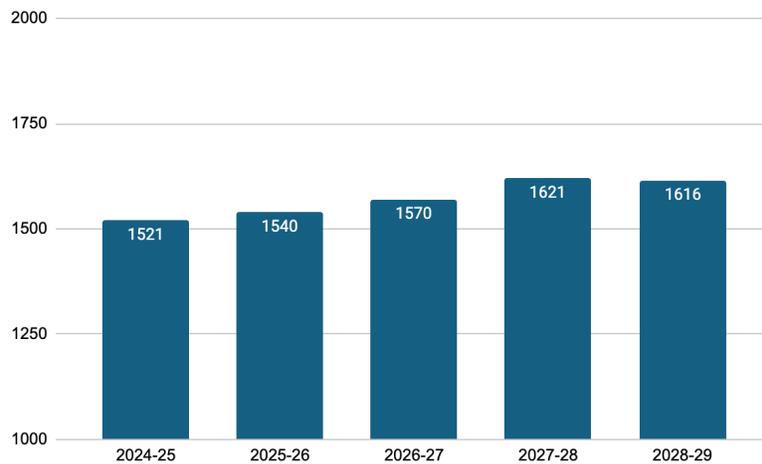


Table 28 and Chart 8 show an elementary enrollment rising by 95 students up to 1,616 in 2028-29 for a material averaged change of 9.5 students per grade over ten grade levels. Spread over six schools, and perhaps seven if Liberty Township School is reopened, there would be sufficient capacity for these additional students, who would need to be housed with or without a regionalization.

Great Meadows provides a site to consider for hosting a combined middle school program in this all-purpose, grades pK-12 option.³¹ There have been twenty years of grade level reconfigurations in the district that make it somewhat difficult to evaluate school enrollment capacities. As background, Great Meadows MS housed grades 5-8 when it opened in 1998, but moved to grades 6-8 sometime before 2008-09. Liberty ES and Central ES were neighborhood schools with grades K-4 in 1998 and then grades K-5 when the middle school began to house grades 6-8. Restructuring after that moved grades K-2 to Central ES and grades 3-5 to Liberty ES. Central ES added a preschool in 2017. After Liberty ES closed in 2019, Central ES housed grades pK-3 and Great Meadows MS housed grades 4-8, which is the current configuration.

³¹ The case for Belvidere and White as host sites will be presented afterward

Again, this is just a look from an enrollment perspective; classroom availability and transportation costs/times will be examined later in this study.

TABLE 29
Student Enrollment History, 2003-04 to 2023-24³²

	2003-04 ³³	2008-09 ³⁴	2013-14 ³⁵	2018-19 ³⁶	2023-24 ³⁷	20 Year % Change
Total Bel Cluster	1953	1816	1519	1316	1157	-41%
Central ES	321	393	229	221	301	-6%
Liberty ES	208	240	287	204	0	-100%
Great Meadows MS	509	326	296	239	349	-31%
Total GM Regional	1038	959	812	664	650	-37%
Total Bel & GM	2991	2775	2331	1980	1807	-40%

The current enrollment in the Great Meadows schools has 388 fewer pK-8 students than in 2003-04, including the Liberty Township School capacity currently sitting vacant.

TABLE 30
Projected Student Enrollments, Grades 6-8
Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
Total Bel Cluster	275	258	237	233	242
Great Meadows	217	218	204	211	209
Total Bel & GM	492	476	441	444	451

³² Table 29 is an excerpt of Table 8 for ease of reference

³³ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES K-4, Liberty ES K-4, Great Meadows MS 5-8

³⁴ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES K-5, Liberty ES K-5, Great Meadows MS 6-8

³⁵ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES K-2, Liberty ES 3-5, Great Meadows MS 6-8

³⁶ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES pK-2, Liberty ES 3-5, Great Meadows MS 6-8

³⁷ Great Meadows grade levels were Central ES pK-3, Great Meadows MS 4-8

TABLE 31
 Projected Student Enrollments, Grades 7-8
 Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
Total Bel Cluster	190	184	163	152	162
Great Meadows	144	149	145	131	142
Total Bel & GM	334	333	308	283	304

With Great Meadows MS having housed 509 students in 2003-04, the building would be sufficiently large from an enrollment perspective to house either a send-receive or regionalized middle school across the five-year enrollment projection.

TABLE 32
 Enrollment Projections, Grades 9-12, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

Year	9	10	11	12	9-12	SC	Total
2024-25	133	131	142	138	544	9	553
2025-26	182	131	129	123	565	8	573
2026-27	158	179	129	114	579	9	588
2027-28	150	154	176	112	591	9	600
2028-29	125	139	160	163	587	9	596

CHART 9
 Enrollment Projections, Grades 9-12, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows, 2024-25 to 2028-29

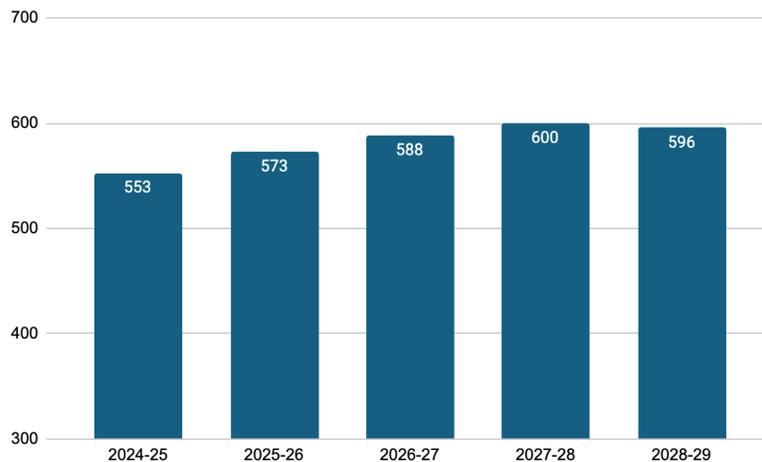


Table 32 and Chart 9 show high school enrollment rising by 43 students up to 596 in 2028-29. Belvidere HS could be capable of supporting an increased enrollment even up to 600 students in 2027-28. The current building housed as many as 552 students in 2008-09, so there may be existing classroom capacity. This will be analyzed later in the facilities section. There may also be some flexibility of space given the location of Belvidere HS and Belvidere ES at the same site. This is especially true if grades 6-8 students were moved to Great Meadows MS in a grade level realignment as part of an all purpose regional school district.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option (without Great Meadows)

In interviews with the study participants, the superintendents identified the possible locations of Belvidere HS and White ES for a combined send-receive middle school program for the Belvidere Cluster. Hope’s and Harmony’s superintendents stated explicitly that they believed their schools would not have capacity to entertain this option. Belvidere has two advantages in that: (1) it would create a unified grade 6-12 school making programming easier to share; and (2) Belvidere ES is connected to Belvidere HS, allowing for the potential use of both as sites for combined middle school classrooms.

TABLE 33
Student Enrollment History, Belvidere Cluster, 2003-04 to 2023-24³⁸

	2003-04	2008-09	2013-14	2018-19	2023-24	20 Year % Change
Belvidere HS	548	552	451	420	318	- 42%
Belvidere ES	416	339	287	254	259	- 38%
White ES	440	394	339	267	261	- 41%
Harmony ES	310	318	262	243	184	- 41%
Hope ES	239	213	180	132	135	- 44%
Total Bel Cluster	1953	1816	1519	1316	1157	-41%

Table 33 exhibits enrollment changes in the schools in this study over the past twenty years. Assuming 2003-04 as a high point of school enrollment capacity, the potential sites for a combined send-receive middle school program have significantly fewer numbers of students today: Belvidere HS has 230 fewer students; Belvidere ES has 157 fewer; and White ES has 179 fewer.

This is just a look from an enrollment perspective, understanding that school classroom use is different from what it was twenty years ago. For example, there is more emphasis today on providing specialized classrooms to address special education needs and the inclusion of many students with learning disabilities in regular education classrooms with lower student numbers.

³⁸ Table 33 is an excerpt of Table 8 for ease of reference

Thus, the enrollment point of view must be balanced with an analysis of classroom availability and transportation costs/times, which will be done later in this study.

The questions remain: Would the availability of additional enrollment capacities at any of these schools support a send-receive, grades 6-8, middle school program? If not, would they support a unified grades 7-8 program?

TABLE 34
Projected Student Enrollments, Grades 6-8, Belvidere Cluster, 2024-25 to 2028-29³⁹

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
Belvidere	96	76	73	68	70
White	72	69	71	75	84
Harmony	69	71	54	48	47
Hope	37	42	39	42	41
Total Bel Cluster	275	258	237	233	242

The availability of space for the additional enrollment of 157 students in Belvidere ES would be insufficient to house the cluster’s grades 6-8 students, even considering that somewhere between 68 and 96 of those students are already projected to be in that school over the next five years. In the most optimistic scenario of 2027-28, White, Hope, and Harmony are projected to have 165 grades 6-8 students. The addition of these students would exceed the Belvidere ES availability for additional enrollment.

The availability of space for the additional enrollment of 179 in White ES would also be insufficient. Again, the most optimistic scenario is 2027-28, where Harmony, Hope, and Belvidere are projected to have 191 students. The addition of these students would exceed the White ES availability for additional enrollment.

The projected enrollment capacity of 230 in Belvidere HS would likewise be insufficient given that the lowest enrollment projection of the four elementaries is in 2027-28 at 233 students. The caveat to this is that Belvidere HS is on the same property and connected to Belvidere ES. Combining their enrollment capacities of 387 student seats would enable the four districts to consider a revised send-receive relationship to place all grades 6-8 students at the same site.

³⁹ This analysis does not consider the small numbers of self-contained students, as they are not broken out by grade level

TABLE 35
 Projected Student Enrollments, Grades 7-8, Belvidere Cluster, 2024-25 to 2028-29

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
Belvidere	70	58	48	47	50
White	48	47	49	43	54
Harmony	47	51	41	32	29
Hope	25	28	26	26	29
Total Bel Cluster	190	184	163	152	162

The picture for combining grades 7-8 in one location allows for more choices, as Belvidere ES, White ES, and Belvidere HS all have enrollment capacity to house the cluster’s grades 7-8 students.

Grades pK-8 Districts with Closing Belvidere HS Option

Table 22 and Chart 2 (shown previously) reflect the projected pK-8 enrollment data, which would also apply to this scenario. That enrollment tops out at 923 students in 2028-29, when each elementary school is projected to have somewhere between 175 and 290 students by 2028-29. These are still small school districts each having its own administration, staff, transportation, and facility costs. If Belvidere were to decide to close its high school, it would be in possession of a large building on the same site as Belvidere ES. In 2003-04 these two buildings held 964 students, making it possible for the four Belvidere Cluster communities to at least consider consolidating their elementary districts into one pK-8 district to be housed at a single central site.

Insights

The overall growth in enrollment in the Belvidere Cluster over the next five years is projected to be 77 students from the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 1,157 students, an aggregate increase of 6.7% or about 1.3% per year. While this may sound stable, it is a drastic turnaround from the preceding two decades of aggregate enrollment declines of 40-44% across the board for these four districts.

When examining the enrollment projections by elementary and secondary school levels, there are important changes going on in the existing Belvidere Cluster. The elementary school (pK-8) enrollment is projected to increase by 74 students (8.8%) over the next five years. The secondary school (9-12) enrollment is expected to remain stable at 312 students in 2023-24 versus 311 students in 2028-29. Again, in the absence of context this stability may seem unimpressive. However, given the enrollment decline of 42% at Belvidere HS over the past two decades, this is an important development. If the projected gains in the elementary population are realized and impact the secondary enrollment positively after 2028-29, the future of Belvidere HS may be much more promising than the previous twenty year trendline indicated.

The overall projected enrollment increase in the Belvidere Cluster would be the same whether the districts remained in the status quo send-receive arrangement or formed an all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district. Therefore, any decision to proceed with a Belvidere Cluster-only regionalization should be focused on educational and financial considerations.

The overall growth in enrollment in Great Meadows over the next five years is projected to be 40 students from the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 937 students, an aggregate increase of 4.8% or just under 1.0% per year. Like the Belvidere Cluster, this must be seen as an important moment of stability within the context of an aggregate enrollment decline of 37% over the previous twenty years.

Combining Great Meadows and the Belvidere Cluster into an all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district would result in an enrollment projected to grow to 2,212 students by 2028-29. The size and scope of such a district would provide it with an ability to be more flexible in terms of resource allocation to provide more effective levels of instructional and support programs without incurring significant additional costs.

If an all purpose regional district is not pursued or achieved, combining grades 6-8 in a Belvidere Cluster send-receive middle school program is a possibility from a historic enrollment perspective at the combined site of Belvidere HS and Belvidere ES. Doing the same at Great Meadows MS could be accomplished logistically if Liberty Township School is reopened. The enrollment point of view must be balanced with an analysis of classroom availability and transportation costs/times, which will be done later in this study.

12. Racial Impact and other Demographic Impacts

Tables 36 through 43 provide disaggregated data for the students in the Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows over the past five years. As expected, changes in race, ethnicity, and income largely mirror the trends in each community.⁴⁰

The cohort survival method of enrollment projection uses averages of six years of enrollment at each grade level to project future grade levels. Averages by years for race and ethnicity do not work to provide the clearest picture of the future. While it is evident that each subgroup has a defined increase or decrease in growth, it would be inaccurate to assume that direction will continue into the future. Specifically the incline or decline could turn around in any of the next few years, as has been seen in the community demographics in this region over the past several years. To be more likely to be accurate in regard to this unknown, the percentages in future years are held constant in this study.

⁴⁰ See Tables 9 through 14

TABLE 36
 Enrollment History, Belvidere Cluster
 Disaggregated by Race and Ethnicity, 2018-19 to 2023-24⁴¹

2018-19	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%	TOTAL
Belvidere	674	580	86.1%	8	1.2%	56	8.3%	4	0.6%	2	0.3%	1	0.1%	23	3.4%	674
Harmony	243	233	95.9%	1	0.4%	5	2.1%	0	0.0%	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	3	1.2%	243
Hope	132	110	83.3%	4	3.0%	16	12.1%	2	1.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	132
White	267	239	89.5%	3	1.1%	16	6.0%	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	8	3.0%	267
TOTAL	1316	1162	88.3%	16	1.2%	93	7.1%	7	0.5%	3	0.2%	1	0.1%	34	2.6%	1316
2019-20	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%	TOTAL
Belvidere	649	561	86.4%	8	1.2%	58	8.9%	3	0.5%	2	0.3%	1	0.2%	16	2.5%	649
Harmony	240	228	95.0%	2	0.8%	6	2.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	1.7%	240
Hope	125	107	85.6%	3	2.4%	13	10.4%	2	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	125
White	274	241	88.0%	4	1.5%	16	5.8%	2	0.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	11	4.0%	274
TOTAL	1288	1137	88.3%	17	1.3%	93	7.2%	7	0.5%	2	0.2%	1	0.1%	31	2.4%	1288
2020-21	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%	TOTAL
Belvidere	629	533	84.7%	7	1.1%	63	10.0%	3	0.5%	2	0.3%	0	0.0%	21	3.3%	629
Harmony	210	202	96.2%	0	0.0%	5	2.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	1.4%	210
Hope	115	97	84.3%	5	4.3%	13	11.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	115
White	239	206	86.2%	4	1.7%	16	6.7%	2	0.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	11	4.6%	239
TOTAL	1193	1038	87.0%	16	1.3%	97	8.1%	5	0.4%	2	0.2%	0	0.0%	35	2.9%	1193
2021-22	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%	TOTAL
Belvidere	594	500	84.2%	8	1.3%	59	9.9%	5	0.8%	3	0.5%	0	0.0%	19	3.2%	594
Harmony	200	187	93.5%	2	1.0%	9	4.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	1.0%	200
Hope	128	104	81.3%	6	4.7%	16	12.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.8%	1	0.8%	128
White	253	219	86.6%	5	2.0%	15	5.9%	2	0.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	12	4.7%	253
TOTAL	1175	1010	86.0%	21	1.8%	99	8.4%	7	0.6%	3	0.3%	1	0.1%	34	2.9%	1175
2022-23	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%	TOTAL
Belvidere	602	485	80.6%	11	1.8%	73	12.1%	7	1.2%	3	0.5%	0	0.0%	23	3.8%	602
Harmony	187	168	89.8%	1	0.5%	15	8.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	1.6%	187
Hope	131	109	83.2%	5	3.8%	14	10.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.8%	2	1.5%	131
White	265	224	84.5%	4	1.5%	19	7.2%	2	0.8%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	16	6.0%	265
TOTAL	1185	986	83.2%	21	1.8%	121	10.2%	9	0.8%	3	0.3%	1	0.1%	44	3.7%	1185
2023-24	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%	TOTAL
Belvidere	577	454	78.7%	16	2.8%	77	13.3%	6	1.0%	2	0.3%	0	0.0%	22	3.8%	577
Harmony	184	170	92.4%	0	0.0%	12	6.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	1.1%	184
Hope	135	112	83.0%	6	4.4%	15	11.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.7%	1	0.7%	135
White	261	218	83.5%	4	1.5%	21	8.0%	4	1.5%	0	0.0%	2	0.8%	12	4.6%	261
TOTAL	1157	954	82.5%	26	2.2%	125	10.8%	10	0.9%	2	0.2%	3	0.3%	37	3.2%	1157

⁴¹ Enr = enrollment, NA/AK = Native American or Alaskan, HI/PI = Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, MR = multiracial

TABLE 37
Enrollment History & Trend, Belvidere Cluster
Disaggregated by Race and Ethnicity, 2018-19 to 2028-29

	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%
2018-19	1316	1162	88.3%	16	1.2%	93	7.1%	7	0.5%	3	0.2%	1	0.1%	34	2.6%
2019-20	1288	1137	88.3%	17	1.3%	93	7.2%	7	0.5%	2	0.2%	1	0.1%	31	2.4%
2020-21	1193	1038	87.0%	16	1.3%	97	8.1%	5	0.4%	2	0.2%	0	0.0%	35	2.9%
2021-22	1175	1010	86.0%	21	1.8%	99	8.4%	7	0.6%	3	0.3%	1	0.1%	34	2.9%
2022-23	1185	986	83.2%	21	1.8%	121	10.2%	9	0.8%	3	0.3%	1	0.1%	44	3.7%
2023-24	1157	954	82.5%	26	2.2%	125	10.8%	10	0.9%	2	0.2%	3	0.3%	37	3.2%
2024-25	1143	942	82.5%	26	2.2%	123	10.8%	10	0.9%	2	0.2%	3	0.3%	37	3.2%
2025-26	1184	976	82.5%	27	2.2%	128	10.8%	10	0.9%	2	0.2%	3	0.3%	38	3.2%
2026-27	1208	996	82.5%	27	2.2%	131	10.8%	10	0.9%	2	0.2%	3	0.3%	39	3.2%
2027-28	1260	1039	82.5%	28	2.2%	136	10.8%	11	0.9%	3	0.2%	3	0.3%	40	3.2%
2028-29	1234	1018	82.5%	28	2.2%	133	10.8%	11	0.9%	2	0.2%	3	0.3%	39	3.2%

TABLE 38
Enrollment History & Trend, Great Meadows, Grades pK-8
Disaggregated by Race and Ethnicity, 2018-19 to 2028-29⁴²

	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%
2018-19	664	569	85.7%	8	1.2%	64	9.6%	14	2.1%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	8	1.2%
2019-20	635	533	83.9%	7	1.1%	64	10.1%	13	2.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	17	2.7%
2020-21	614	493	80.3%	8	1.3%	78	12.7%	15	2.4%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	19	3.1%
2021-22	639	508	79.5%	8	1.3%	86	13.5%	16	2.5%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	18	2.8%
2022-23	642	511	79.6%	10	1.6%	87	13.6%	12	1.9%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	19	3.0%
2023-24	650	500	76.9%	13	2.0%	101	15.5%	12	1.8%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	21	3.2%
2024-25	674	518	76.9%	13	2.0%	105	15.5%	12	1.8%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	22	3.2%
2025-26	682	524	76.9%	14	2.0%	106	15.5%	13	1.8%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	22	3.2%
2026-27	694	534	76.9%	14	2.0%	108	15.5%	13	1.8%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	22	3.2%
2027-28	701	539	76.9%	14	2.0%	109	15.5%	13	1.8%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	23	3.2%
2028-29	692	533	76.9%	14	2.0%	108	15.5%	13	1.8%	0	0.0%	3	0.5%	22	3.2%

Looking at the disaggregated data by race and ethnicity in Tables 37 through 39, the Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows show some similarities. In 2023-24, the White population was 82.5% of the Belvidere Cluster enrollment and 76.9% of the Great Meadows enrollment. Comparisons for several other populations during that year were 10.8% versus 15.5% for Hispanics, 2.2% versus 2.0% for Blacks, and 0.9% versus 1.8% for Asians, respectively. Bringing the two groups together to form an all-purpose, regional school district would move toward balancing out the variations in race and ethnicity exhibited as separate entities.

⁴² Elementary student race and ethnicity data is used here as a proxy comparison, as this information was not available for grades 9-12 students from Great Meadows

TABLE 39
Enrollment History & Trend, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows
Disaggregated by Race and Ethnicity, 2018-19 to 2028-29

	Enr	White	%	Black	%	Hispan	%	Asian	%	NA/AK	%	HI/PI	%	MR	%
2018-19	1980	1731	87.4%	24	1.2%	157	7.9%	21	1.1%	3	0.2%	2	0.1%	42	2.1%
2019-20	1923	1670	86.8%	24	1.2%	157	8.2%	20	1.0%	2	0.1%	2	0.1%	48	2.5%
2020-21	1807	1531	84.7%	24	1.3%	175	9.7%	20	1.1%	2	0.1%	1	0.1%	54	3.0%
2021-22	1814	1518	83.7%	29	1.6%	185	10.2%	23	1.3%	3	0.2%	4	0.2%	52	2.9%
2022-23	1827	1497	81.9%	31	1.7%	208	11.4%	21	1.1%	3	0.2%	4	0.2%	63	3.4%
2023-24	1807	1454	80.5%	39	2.2%	226	12.5%	22	1.2%	2	0.1%	6	0.3%	58	3.2%
2024-25	1816	1460	80.5%	39	2.2%	228	12.5%	22	1.2%	2	0.1%	6	0.3%	58	3.2%
2025-26	1866	1501	80.5%	40	2.2%	234	12.5%	23	1.2%	2	0.1%	6	0.3%	60	3.2%
2026-27	1902	1530	80.5%	41	2.2%	238	12.5%	23	1.2%	2	0.1%	6	0.3%	61	3.2%
2027-28	1961	1579	80.5%	42	2.2%	245	12.5%	24	1.2%	3	0.1%	7	0.3%	63	3.2%
2028-29	1927	1550	80.5%	42	2.2%	241	12.5%	23	1.2%	2	0.1%	6	0.3%	62	3.2%

TABLE 40
Enrollment History, Belvidere Cluster
Disaggregated by Income and Language, 2018-19 to 2023-24⁴³

2018-19	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
Belvidere	674	101	15.0%	1	0.1%
Harmony	243	28	11.5%	0	0.0%
Hope	132	22	16.7%	0	0.0%
White	267	47	17.6%	0	0.0%
TOTAL	1316	198	15.0%	1	0.1%
2019-20	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
Belvidere	649	118	18.2%	0	0.0%
Harmony	240	31	12.9%	0	0.0%
Hope	125	20	16.0%	0	0.0%
White	274	46	16.8%	6	2.2%
TOTAL	1288	215	16.7%	6	0.5%
2020-21	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
Belvidere	629	115	18.3%	0	0.0%
Harmony	210	26	12.4%	0	0.0%
Hope	115	15	13.0%	0	0.0%
White	239	41	17.2%	6	2.5%
TOTAL	1193	197	16.5%	6	0.5%

⁴³ FRL = students qualifying for free or reduced price meals, ELL = students identified as English language learners

2021-22	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
Belvidere	594	97	16.4%	0	0.0%
Harmony	200	23	11.5%	0	0.0%
Hope	128	10	7.8%	0	0.0%
White	253	32	12.7%	6	2.4%
TOTAL	1175	162	13.8%	6	0.5%
2022-23	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
Belvidere	602	132	21.9%	0	0.0%
Harmony	187	23	12.3%	0	0.0%
Hope	131	14	10.7%	0	0.0%
White	265	40	15.1%	5	1.9%
TOTAL	1185	209	17.6%	5	0.4%
2023-24	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
Belvidere	577	160	27.7%	4	0.7%
Harmony	184	26	14.1%	0	0.0%
Hope	135	14	10.4%	0	0.0%
White	261	44	16.9%	7	2.7%
TOTAL	1157	244	21.1%	11	1.0%

TABLE 41
Enrollment History and Trend, Belvidere Cluster
Disaggregated by Income and Language, 2018-19 to 2028-29

	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
2018-19	1316	198	15.0%	1	0.1%
2019-20	1288	215	16.7%	6	0.5%
2020-21	1193	197	16.5%	6	0.5%
2021-22	1175	162	13.8%	6	0.5%
2022-23	1185	209	17.6%	5	0.4%
2023-24	1157	244	21.1%	11	1.0%
2024-25	1143	192	16.8%	6	0.5%
2025-26	1184	202	17.1%	7	0.6%
2026-27	1208	207	17.2%	7	0.6%
2027-28	1260	217	17.3%	7	0.6%
2028-29	1234	220	17.8%	7	0.6%

TABLE 42
 Enrollment History and Trend, Great Meadows, Grades pK-8
 Disaggregated by Income and Language, 2018-19 to 2028-29⁴⁴

	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
2018-19	664	80	12.0%	2	0.3%
2019-20	634	72	11.4%	6	0.9%
2020-21	614	66	10.7%	11	1.8%
2021-22	639	38	5.9%	12	1.9%
2022-23	642	86	13.4%	26	4.0%
2023-24	650	88	13.5%	23	3.5%
2024-25	674	75	11.2%	14	2.1%
2025-26	682	75	11.0%	16	2.4%
2026-27	694	76	11.0%	18	2.6%
2027-28	701	77	11.0%	19	2.8%
2028-29	692	82	11.9%	20	2.9%

TABLE 43
 Enrollment History and Trend, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows
 Disaggregated by Income and Language, 2018-19 to 2028-29

	Enr	FRL	%	ELL	%
2018-19	1980	278	14.0%	3	0.2%
2019-20	1922	287	28.5%	12	0.6%
2020-21	1807	263	14.6%	17	0.9%
2021-22	1814	200	11.0%	18	1.0%
2022-23	1827	295	16.5%	31	1.7%
2023-24	1807	332	18.4%	34	1.9%
2024-25	1816	267	17.2%	20	1.0%
2025-26	1866	278	17.7%	23	1.2%
2026-27	1902	283	15.9%	25	1.3%
2027-28	1961	295	16.1%	27	1.4%
2028-29	1927	302	16.9%	27	1.4%

Looking at the disaggregated data by income and language, the Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows show some differences. In 2023-24, the free and reduced lunch population was 21.1% of the Belvidere Cluster enrollment and 13.5% of the Great Meadows enrollment. The English language learner population in the same year was 1.0% in the Belvidere Cluster and 3.5% in Great Meadows. Bringing the two groups together to form an all-purpose, regional school district would move toward balancing out the variations in income and language exhibited as separate entities.

⁴⁴ Elementary student income and language data is used here as a proxy comparison, as this information was not available for grades 9-12 students from Great Meadows

Insights

Future projections of disaggregated data may be less necessary than that for overall enrollments, but the schools will still want to consider the trends. Increases in the number of Hispanic and Black students and families provide an opportunity to evaluate the equity of access to resources and programs in the schools for these traditionally underserved groups. Changes in cultural background present a moment to ensure that honoring the dignity of each student and developing an even greater sense of belonging in the schools' climate are priorities. Higher household incomes combined with lower percentages of families qualifying for free and reduced meals should reduce the needs for certain kinds of at-risk programming designed to address the effects of lower income.

The data in this section indicates that the overall enrollment in an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional district will remain relatively stable over the next five years. Changes among disaggregated groups are opportunities to look more deeply into those specific needs. In summary, the data indicates that creating an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district for Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows will not create any significant demographic or enrollment changes in the school district.

Impact of a Great Meadows Withdrawal on Hackettstown HS

Upon reviewing the analyses in this domain, the consultants are mindful of the requirements of the SREP grant guidelines, which state, "Feasibility study work plans must include crucial decision points that will halt the project should it appear that the project is not feasible on a joint or shared basis. The grantee must consult with the SREP before authorizing any further activity."⁴⁵ It is specifically cited in the regionalization law, "that the newly formed or enlarged regional district will not, and will not be foreseeably likely to, increase or exacerbate segregation among the districts seeking to regionalize or, as applicable, the school districts from which a school district is seeking to withdraw and school districts in the surrounding region as determined by the number and percentage of students affected by such consolidations or withdrawals."⁴⁶

The impact of a potential withdrawal of Great Meadows from its send-receive agreement with Hackettstown for its grade 9-12 students poses significant demographic concerns that call into question the continuation of Great Meadows in this study. The following data points are offered as evidence:

- Looking at overall enrollments from 2018-19 to 2023-24, Great Meadows sent an average of 306 regular education students in grades 9-12 to Hackettstown HS, accounting for 35.4% of Hackettstown's HS average school population of 864 as shown in Table 44. Reducing the Hackettstown HS enrollment by over one-third would have significant consequences for the school's educational program and the district's financial situation.

⁴⁵ SREP Grant Guidelines, 2024

⁴⁶ N.J.S.A. 18A:13-47.3c

TABLE 44
Enrollment, Hackettstown HS from Great Meadows, 2018-19 to 2023-24

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	6 yr avg
HHS total enrollment	827	835	854	870	907	889	864
Great Meadows students at HHS ⁴⁷	356	328	316	291	265	279	306

- For the student populations set to enter Hackettstown HS over the coming years, the racial and ethnic diversity of pK-8 students in Great Meadows in 2023-24 was significantly different from that in Hackettstown as shown in Table 45.

TABLE 45
Enrollment, Disaggregated by Race and Ethnicity, Grades pK-8
Hackettstown and Great Meadows, 2023-24

District pK-8	Enrolled	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	NA/AK	HI/PI	MR
Great Meadows	650	76.9%	2.0%	15.5%	1.8%	0.0%	0.5%	3.2%
Hackettstown	1,122	47.4%	2.9%	43.4%	3.1%	0.4%	0.2%	2.7%

- For the student populations set to enter Hackettstown HS over the coming years, the income and language diversity of pK-8 students in Great Meadows in 2023-24 was significantly different from that in Hackettstown as shown in Table 46.

TABLE 46
Enrollment, Disaggregated by Income and Language, Grades pK-8
Hackettstown and Great Meadows, 2023-24

District pK-8	Enrolled	FRL	ELL
Great Meadows	650	13.5%	3.5%
Hackettstown	1,122	42.2%	17.8%

The consultants informed the superintendents of this data and the segregative concerns they suggest. The further inclusion of Great Meadows in this study was paused pending review by the NJ Division of Local Government Services per state guidelines. The division’s review concluded that this study should continue with Great Meadows’ participation, and that the NJDOE would make a formal determination regarding school segregation as part of its review of the final study. The consultants are also aware that Great Meadows is applying for a separate feasibility study in partnership with Hackettstown.

⁴⁷ Great Meadows student information system

EDUCATION and PROGRAM

This domain will examine the educational impact of the various options outlined earlier in this study. The following question is guiding our investigation: *Will the creation of an all purpose regional school district, a send-receive middle school program, or the closing of Belvidere HS produce educational benefits or challenges for staff and students, including traditionally underserved populations, when compared to the status quo?*

This domain will look at possible educational enhancements or challenges that may be realized by examining the existing profile of each school district and then exploring curricular programs and philosophies, recent performance measures, the availability of specialized programs, extracurricular offerings, and indicators of school climate and culture. It will also examine staffing patterns and make some projections.

Data in this domain were collected via state and local document review and site visits. During site visits, investigators met with administrators overseeing the educational programs and teachers who serve students in key instructional and transitional content and grade levels.

13. School District Profiles

Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows are all public school districts located in Warren County, NJ. Harmony, Hope, and White are grades pK-8 districts that have send-receive agreements with grades pK-12 Belvidere to have their high school students educated at Belvidere HS. Great Meadows is a pK-8 district that has a send-receive agreement with grades pK-12 Hackettstown to have their high school students attend Hackettstown HS. Each has had long standing and successful send-receive relationships, building strong ties over many years, and complementing each other's strengths well.

None of the districts participates in the state's interdistrict school choice program at this time. Warren County does have five school districts who offer school choice and are options for families: Greenwich, Lopatcong, North Warren, Oxford, and Phillipsburg. Warren County also houses a charter school option for elementary students in grades K-8 at Ridge and Valley Charter School in Frelinghuysen Township and a technical school for secondary students in grades 9-12 at Warren County Technical School in Franklin Township.

Belvidere

Belvidere is a grades pK-12 school district with two schools: grades pK-8 Belvidere ES and grades 9-12 Belvidere HS. The former Third Street ES was closed in 2019 due to declining enrollment, and the Board of Education is looking to sell the building. Besides its own students, Belvidere HS also educates students in grades 9-12 from Harmony, Hope, and White Townships.

The Belvidere School District mission states that it will:

Celebrate our past and empower our future while focusing on the four cornerstones of our district: Tradition, Excellence, Academics and Community. We strive to build confidence and promote collaboration. We encourage an equal partnership with our students and staff as well as its community members. We empower everyone to develop the best version of themselves. The Belvidere School District is committed to shaping students into global citizens, who take initiative for their success and contribute to the continued excellence of the district. Our students are leaders in the decision making process of their education and will be prepared to excel in a 21st Century society.⁴⁸

In an interview, Belvidere's superintendent cited particular points of pride as the FFA program, the Wall of Fame, and the Belvidere HS Hall of Fame, which has stringent requirements.⁴⁹ Among the challenges noted were a nearby district's salary guide that has drawn a number of staff away from Belvidere and getting the community to understand this competitive dynamic.

In similar interviews, 9th grade teachers pointed to traditions in which the community takes special pride as happening frequently in the fall season with athletic contests, homecoming, and strong grade 9 student participation in all activities so no one gets lost. Athletics brings students together, as they often know each other from community based activities. This familiarity is also seen in the classrooms through greater class participation. It was noted that alumni teachers have been bringing back ideas from what happened in the past to bring kids closer together.

7th and 8th grade teachers identified that their students are likely the most diverse in the cluster, making for a rich environment. They stated that being a walking district was important in contributing to their small community feel. They also noted success with their co-teaching model. Challenges were expressed as a need for more resources in general and a desire for more specialized resources such as response to intervention (RTI) support, a Wilson trained teacher, and more consistently trained in-class support staff. While teachers felt students needed to be more independent, they did not see it as a major transition for their 8th graders moving into high school.

Harmony

Harmony is a grades pK-8 school district with one school: Harmony Township ES. The district has a send-receive relationship with Belvidere for its students in grades 9-12.

The Harmony Township School District mission states:

We put our children first. To that end, our first and foremost priority is to provide an excellent, broad-based education to meet or exceed current applicable statutes. In addition, we are committed to guarding their safety, building their character and nurturing their growth as lifelong learners and global citizens.

⁴⁸ Belvidere School District Website

⁴⁹ Staff comments in each district from interviews at Belvidere HS, 7-8-2024

We support our staff, our community and each other in the pursuit of these noble objectives by carefully balancing our financial, administrative, legal, regulatory, and ethical responsibilities in harmony with the District's dynamic strategic objectives and tactical needs.

Whenever possible, we seek the efficiencies and advantages of the latest technology and other available resources to maximize our effectiveness in all we do.⁵⁰

In an interview, Harmony's superintendent (who is shared with Belvidere) cited points of pride as the community being a source of strength, the RTI program being one of the best in the state, and switching the English language arts program to Core Knowledge LA. Among the challenges noted were again the neighboring district's salary guide and getting the community to understand this competitive dynamic.

7th and 8th grade teachers noted that moving to a co-teaching model last year was beneficial both academically and socially, and that the right combinations of teachers matter. The school offers a strong number of electives and extracurriculars considering its size. Students are observed to need better organizational skills and a greater sense of responsibility. Otherwise, problems are seen as local, minimal, and unique to the school and community.

Hope

Hope is a grades pK-8 school district with one school: Hope Township ES. The district has a send-receive relationship with Belvidere for its students in grades 9-12.

The Hope Township School District mission states:

Committed to excellence and continuous improvement, the Hope Township School District, in collaboration with our community, strives to ensure that all students achieve their highest level of critical thinking and creativity, that they value themselves and the diversity of others, and that they are knowledgeable, meaningful contributors capable of excelling in a rapidly changing world.⁵¹

The district has a 2022-25 strategic plan with five goal statements:

- Promote the achievement of all students at the highest level of their individual abilities in all identified areas;
- Teach all students, through skill development, the value and importance of learning about self-management, social awareness, relationship management and responsible decision-making;
- Foster a collaborative culture that invites and celebrates community support and participation;
- Provide a safe, welcoming and well-maintained learning environment; and

⁵⁰ Harmony Township School District Website

⁵¹ Hope Township School District Website

- Maximize efficiencies in all areas of the District for the continuous improvement and optimization of resources.⁵²

In an interview, Hope's interim superintendent cited points of pride as being the focus of the community and the small size of the school with only one classroom per grade level. Among the challenges noted were school funding, filling staff positions, and veteran teachers coming close to retirement.

7th and 8th grade teachers believe their small class sizes provide greater opportunities for personal attention and make it possible to move more students with special needs into the mainstream classrooms. They feel that student foundational skills need to be honed and practiced, and that students need a better understanding of high school academic workloads. A downside voiced about the small school size is the isolation of students from a broader community of their peers, which would provide their students with more competition.

White

White is a grades pK-8 school district with one school: White Township Consolidated School. The district has a send-receive relationship with Belvidere for its students in grades 9-12.

The White Township School District mission states that it is:

Committed to inspire, engage and educate our students by providing innovative, personalized opportunities for growth and learning. With a foundation based on academic excellence and a focus on social emotional learning, our students will achieve their full potential and become productive, responsible, resilient members of the community and contributing members of society.⁵³

The district has a 2020-24 strategic plan with six goal statements:

- Foster a safe and secure learning environment;
- Address students' social and emotional well-being, so students can reach their full potential and become resilient, lifelong learners;
- Create academic excellence through 21st century learning, engaging experiences and innovative teaching methods;
- Facilitate personalized learning experiences for students by providing remediation and enrichment opportunities to maximize students' potential;
- Engage parents in the learning process maximizing the relationship between the school and home and
- Cultivate community partnerships providing students with authentic learning experiences, career development, and service-based opportunities.⁵⁴

⁵² Hope Township School District Strategic Plan, 2022-25

⁵³ White Township School District Website

⁵⁴ White Township School District Strategic Plan, 2020-24

In an interview, White's superintendent cited points of pride as being the community, small size being a blessing with two homerooms per grade level, and a counselor who keeps an eye on everyone so that no student falls through the cracks. Among the challenges noted were the small size that translates into a lack of robust middle school extracurriculars.

7th and 8th grade teachers appreciate the small class sizes (about 12-14 per classroom on average), which provide opportunities for them to gain great knowledge of their students. A value of a pK-8 school was identified as middle school students being involved with the elementary grade children, keeping the older ones a bit more grounded with leadership opportunities. Like in Hope, they also saw the downside of smaller school size and the need for greater competition.

Great Meadows

Great Meadows is a grades pK-8 regional school district with two schools: Central ES (grades pK-3) and Great Meadows MS (grades 4-8). The district has a send-receive relationship with Hackettstown for its students in grades 9-12.

The mission of the Great Meadows Regional School District is to:

Provide quality educational opportunities that ensure the individual success of all students within a safe and supportive environment and to build life-long learners who will meet society's challenges into and beyond the 21st century. To that end, it is anticipated that all students will achieve the New Jersey Student Learning Standards at all grade levels.⁵⁵

The district has a 2021-26 strategic plan with five goal statements:

- Provide authentic, hands-on, multimodal and appropriate learning opportunities for students at all levels.
- Provide programming that addresses the needs of the whole child, with a focus on collaboration, social skills and physical needs, and the cognitive development of students.
- Create an environment of social, emotional, and physical well being so that students will be able to interact cooperatively with others now and in the future.
- Provide students a deep understanding of cultural diversity and citizenship through making local and global connections.
- Build the district facilities and technology environments to provide the foundation for infinite student growth without limitations.⁵⁶

In an interview, Great Meadows' superintendent cited points of pride as being the community and school spirit. Among the challenges noted were school funding, the rise in special education numbers, and some loss of staff to a neighboring district due to salary guide differences.

⁵⁵ Great Meadows Regional School District Website

⁵⁶ Great Meadows Regional School District Strategic Plan, 2021-26

7th and 8th grade teachers highlighted that students can learn good habits in a safe place. 4th grade is elementary based, 5th grade starts transition from classroom to classroom, and 6th-8th grades have a more middle school structure. Having grades 4-8 at Great Meadows MS allows for a similar dynamic as at White, where older students can interact with and be role models for younger children. There are also visits by peer ambassadors every week from Hackettstown HS and reciprocal visits by Great Meadows MS students for tours at the high school

14. Curriculum & Instruction

This part of the analysis will have three focal points. The first will look at the curricular programs offered by the elementary and middle schools in Great Meadows, White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere. The second will investigate the programs typically found in middle schools as compared to the offerings in the Belvidere Cluster's elementary schools. The third will compare the curricular programs offered by Belvidere HS, Hackettstown HS, and several other area high schools. The benefits of program coordination between the elementary/middle schools and Belvidere HS will also be addressed.

The NJ Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) serve as the foundation for education in the state. These standards outline the minimum knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire at each grade level in various subject areas. The NJDOE regularly updates and revises these standards to ensure they align with current educational research and best practices.

By way of background information, school districts use the NJSLS as follows:

Adoption and Implementation

The NJDOE adopts and publishes the NJSLS, which cover the core subjects of English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, World Languages, Visual and Performing Arts, Comprehensive Health and Physical Education, and Computer Science and Design Thinking. The NJSLS also include standards in Career Readiness, Life Literacies, and Key Skills. Content and skills addressed in these standards include Personal Financial Literacy, Career Awareness Exploration, Preparation and Training, Career and Technical Education, and Life Literacies and Key Skills. This standard outlines key literacies and technical skills such as critical thinking, global and cultural awareness, and technology literacy that are crucial for students to develop to live and work in an interconnected global economy.

Curriculum Development

School districts, including those in this study, use the NJSLS as a guide to developing their curricula. They create instructional plans that ensure students have the opportunity to master the content and skills outlined in the standards. Districts may also design curriculum maps to show the progression of skills and knowledge from one grade level to the next.

Assessment and Accountability

The NJSLs influence the development of state assessments, which are used to measure student proficiency and growth. These assessments are designed to reflect the content and skills specified in the standards. Schools and districts are held accountable for student performance based on these assessments. Results may impact school ratings, teacher evaluations, and other aspects of the accountability system.

Monitoring and Adjustments

School districts regularly monitor student progress through various assessments and adjust instructional practices based on the data. This process ensures that students are meeting the standards and that any necessary interventions are implemented.

Professional Development

Teachers and administrators participate in professional development to understand the NJSLs and how to effectively implement them in the classroom. This training helps educators align their teaching practices with the standards.

Parent and Community Communication

Best practices suggest that schools communicate with parents and the community about the NJSLs, providing information on what students are expected to learn at each grade level. This transparency helps foster collaboration between educators, parents, and the community.

Curricular Philosophies, Content Focus, and Instructional Materials⁵⁷

Because each elementary and middle school involved in this study has adopted a curriculum aligned with the most recent version of the NJSLs for each specific content area, the actual curricula of each district would include differences in instructional practices, resources, and internal academic assessments. Actual instructional practices often vary as much between classrooms within a school as they do between schools or between districts. Therefore, these would require much more intensive investigation than expected in this kind of study.

Preschool

Children who attend high-quality preschool tend to be more prepared for kindergarten, which leads to higher academic achievement in other grades. When children don't attend early schooling, they can miss out on developing valuable social and emotional skills as well. Belvidere and Great Meadows have been awarded state grants that have allowed them to establish free, universal, preschool programs for interested families. Belvidere's program was established four years ago, while Great Meadows' is more recent with two new classes added in April 2024 and three more planned for September 2024. Great Meadows is also investigating a send-receive option.

⁵⁷ Curricular information and staff insights from interviews at Belvidere HS, 7-8-2024

White, Hope, and Harmony each offer half-day, tuition-based, preschool programs as choices for their families. All districts are required to provide preschool for students with disabilities and these tuition-based programs for regular education students allow for interactions with non-disabled peers. There appears to be limited appetite in these communities to apply for the state grant at this time.

Working as one all purpose regional school district, the staff could research available space within the confines of the larger region and potentially expand its preschool offerings. As per current guidelines, school districts taking advantage of state funding must commit to hiring a master teacher, a preschool intervention and referral specialist, and a community and parent involvement specialist. By combining the resources for which each district is currently eligible and hiring one person to serve each of these roles across the expanded program, an all purpose, regional school district could consolidate resources, freeing up funding to house or lease and maintain the space necessary to expand preschool to benefit students and families across the region.

Operating a preschool program under a shared services agreement, while possible, comes with additional complications. Preschool funding is allocated by district with only students domiciled in that district eligible to attend. While sharing staff like a master teacher and interventionist is certainly possible and selecting a common curriculum is relatively easy, identifying and sharing space within the communities or the greater region could prove more challenging.

ELA

Similarities combined with different approaches present some elements of coordination in ELA, which are apparent as students enter Belvidere HS. High school teachers and administrators noted that writing is a real focus of instructional work, though this is highly teacher dependent, and there are very different methodologies going on in separate classrooms.

Hope and Belvidere use Journeys K-5 as their ELA instructional foundation, and both schools focus on more writing than in the past. Belvidere introduces novel-based literature in grades 6-8, while Hope picks up the Scott Foresman ELA series after 5th grade connecting writing to literature. Hope also uses a Writer's Workshop approach with a focus on common vocabulary, common strategies, and spiral reviewing.

White and Great Meadows have traditionally used the Reader's and Writer's Workshop while adding phonics instruction for a more balanced approach. White's teachers have looked at Science of Reading materials and received Orton-Gillingham training, though it has been admittedly hard to sell some of the changes. Harmony had the most divergent approach, using Amplify's Content Knowledge LA but with 27 different ELA-specific products.

9th grade English teachers can tell which district students come from based on techniques and habits. Hope students tend to write better than others, while reading comprehension seems pretty equal. It is seen as beneficial to have the same students over multiple years for greater knowledge of strengths.

Math

There is more overlap in math in the elementary schools. Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere all use GoMath from grades K-5, and Harmony continues to use that series through 8th grade. Belvidere noted that top students have done really well with it, while other students struggle more and need additional resources. Hope relies on the expertise of an “exceptional” math teacher at the middle grades level.

Great Meadows and White use Pearson Envision K-8 as their Math instructional foundation. They have both allocated more instructional time by moving to an 80 minute block for math, and added accelerated math in Grade 7 for advanced students.

Science and Social Studies

Science and Social Studies time is built into the regular schedules in all districts. Harmony and Belvidere have dedicated science time for Grades K-5, and Grades 6-8 science classes are lab based. Great Meadows uses Science Fusion as a base for Grades K-5. Grades 6-8 employ Science Dimensions and classes are lab based. Hope and White focus on teacher created units using FOSS kits, and Grades 5-8 science classes are lab based.

In Science, 9th grade teachers find students seem to be much more test-based no matter where they are from. Discussion-based topics take awhile to get into before students feel comfortable, with deeper thinking about Science being a struggle at the start of the year. Familiarity with lab equipment is pretty good, and processes used in the various elementary schools are different but not wrong. Most high school teachers teach only one grade level, although the AP Biology teacher also sees Honors Biology students in 9th grade.

In Social Studies, staff finds incoming students good at memorizing, while comprehension is a struggle across the board. White and Belvidere are coming in stronger in Social Studies. There are four high school teachers, each teaching one grade level, so teachers typically have students only once in their careers.

Specials (art, music, physical education, world language, etc.)

Great Meadows students in grades K-3 receive a specials array of art, technology, media, Spanish, and music for 45 minutes each per week and physical education twice per week. For grades 4-8, specials include technology, Spanish, and art, which meet every day for 40-45 minutes during two marking periods per year. Band and chorus start in 4th grade, and if students do not choose either, they do not have music.

Hope students get a 42 minute class period for physical education twice a week and music (band chorus option), art, and technology once a week.

White’s pK-8 students attend art, technology, media, music, and Spanish once per week for 40 minutes. Middle school students can do a band chorus option. Last year White’s Spanish teacher

had retired, so they offered online instruction. This year they are sharing Harmony's Spanish teacher.

Harmony students have 40 minute periods of art once a week, music twice a week with individual music lessons and chorus options, physical education almost every day, technology twice a week for grades 6-8 and once a week for grades K-5. Harmony offers Spanish in all grades with grades K-5 having the language one 40 minute period per week and grades 6-8 having two to three 40 minute periods per week. They share Belvidere's art teacher.

Belvidere students attend 40 minute periods of art and music once a week and physical education three times a week. Spanish is taught in grades 5-8 for 40 mins per week for one trimester.

Curriculum Coordination

Currently, there is a single part-time person hired by the Belvidere Cluster to help coordinate curriculum. This person facilitates articulation meetings among the districts at various grade levels and summarizes the discussions into curricular revisions. However, this person has no role in supervision to assess the implementation of these revisions. The position of director of curriculum and instruction in Great Meadows was shared at one time with Hackettstown but that ended in 2020. Great Meadows had a standalone director position in 2021-22 and 2022-23, but those responsibilities were absorbed by the principals starting in 2023-24 due to an administrative restructure. As such, and as demonstrated above, moderate curriculum coordination exists, resulting in different experiences for students prior to entering high school.

Overall, one central regional curriculum office serving students in grades pK-12 can play a vital role in providing cohesive direction, support, and coordination for curriculum and instructional practices within the schools that comprise the region, ultimately leading to improved student achievement and success. A coordinated curriculum in pK-8 would result in students reaching 9th grade better prepared for high school expectations and allow high school teachers to spend less time establishing a baseline of common understandings and expectations with students.

A centralized curriculum office can increase the efficiency with which it uses resources by eliminating duplicative efforts and services across the multiple districts. This can serve as a win for all of the districts, and ultimately the students, both financially and academically. The types of efficiencies discussed here could ultimately help in preserving instructional support systems, such as interventionists and teachers of students with special needs, throughout the expanded district or within the currently existing districts.

An all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district made up of the four districts in the Belvidere Cluster plus Great Meadows would have a projected student enrollment in 2024-25 of 2,212 students. This regionalization would allow for at least one administrative staff member (e.g., assistant superintendent, director of instruction) to be devoted largely to the leadership of curriculum coordination and instructional supervision. Regionalizing the Belvidere Cluster alone would still

create a large enough scale at 1,143 students to justify a significant portion of a staff member's role to focus on greater alignment and connectivity in the academic program.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option

The analysis above demonstrates that students entering Belvidere HS from elementary schools in White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere have dissimilar educational backgrounds. Great Meadows joining an all purpose regional district would bring another set of disparate learning foundations. Having all students entering high school with shared experiences in terms of educational programs and philosophy, time spent studying each of those content areas, and the professional learning that accompanies those programs can offer multiple benefits.

By aligning programs, assessment tools, and time allotted to teaching each subject area:

- Teachers of upper grades should see greater consistency in student experiences, which translates into lessons that meet the needs of more students.
- 9th grade staff members will have a much greater awareness of the common skills students have likely mastered and those skills in which they will likely have to develop further. Teachers of the upper grades can more easily share with the teachers of the lower grades the information they need to help them plan and adjust their instruction.
- The alignment of assessment tools allows both sending and receiving teachers to speak a common language when they have access to consistent data about student strengths and areas where additional support may be needed.
- Consistency in the time allotted to literacy and math instruction can produce more consistent results among students and better prepare them for success in high school.

Overall, shared educational programs in grades K-8 can contribute to more cohesive and effective approaches to a student's education, benefiting both students and educators alike. Better alignment of programs in all grades pK-12 would result from regionalization or shared services. This would allow staff to further investigate programs and their results prior to making a decision about investments in them. Reducing the replication of program review, curriculum writing, and professional learning comes not only with financial benefits, but should also result in stronger academic programs throughout the region.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option

Exemplary middle schools provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences and environments for young adolescent students. The Association for Middle Level Educators (AMLE), a leading international organization for middle school educators, believes successful middle schools have five essential attributes including being responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging.⁵⁸ The organization identifies 18 characteristics in three categories that successful schools

⁵⁸ See amle.org

exemplify: Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment - stimulating a love of learning, attitude of inquiry, asking questions and discovering answers; Leadership and Organization - developmentally responsive schools that are intellectually vigorous; and Culture and Community - culture that sustains the dignity of all members in the community where students are valued and respected.

AMLE promotes the belief that middle schools respond to the unique developmental characteristics of young adolescents by providing support to students while recognizing their individuality and the need for learning experiences that address cognitive developmental differences.

To achieve the goals of a successful middle school, it is preferable to educate grades 6-8 students in a separate school or program with a sufficient enrollment size that allows for greater opportunities to address their educational as well as their social and emotional learning needs. In addition, middle schools often have teachers with specific subject matter expertise, which can provide students with a deeper level of instruction.

Next, we look briefly at two local middle school programs, Great Meadows MS and Hackettstown MS, to show how a middle school program plays out in local contexts.⁵⁹

The Great Meadows MS program

The teachers at Great Meadows MS in grades 6-8 are highly qualified in their respective subject areas including ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies. Additionally, selected students in grade 8 take Algebra I. ELA and Math are taught in double block periods of 74 minutes of instruction per day. Teachers are part of grade level teams and professional learning communities with common planning times.

Students have one period of health/physical education every day for the entire school year. World language, band, chorus, art, technology, and performing arts are provided on a trimester basis, during two periods each school day.

There are approximately 225 students in grades 6-8, and several extra-curricular programs are offered such as archery, basketball, volleyball, chorus, band, student council, and the school play.

The Hackettstown MS program

Hackettstown MS serves students in grades 5-8. Those in grades 6-8 are taught by teachers with subject matter expertise. In addition, grade level teachers teaching the same group of students work in teams and participate in professional learning communities. There are honors courses in ELA, Science, and Social Studies, along with Algebra I for selected 8th grade students. The core subject areas are taught throughout the school year. In addition, there are cycle classes that include art, Spanish, theater, music, technology, chorus/band, and computer science.

With nearly 360 students in grades 6-8, the school offers a wide variety of extracurricular activities including the Breakfast Club, Homework Club, Academic Support Club, Drama Club, Jazz Band,

⁵⁹ Phone interviews with superintendents, October 2024

Symphonic Band, Percussion Ensemble, Hacket-tones Ensemble, Tiger Tunes (choir), Student Council, yearbook, cross country, and volleyball.

Grades 6-8 in Belvidere, Hope, Harmony, and White

Each of the four districts has a relatively small number of students in grades 6-8, making it difficult for any of the districts to have subject matter and grade level team teaching, a hallmark of most middle schools. Belvidere has almost 100 students in grades 6-8, White has just under 90, Harmony has about 60, and Hope has approximately 35. If these grade levels were combined so that all students in grades 6-8 attended a single middle school program, there would be 275 students which would allow for grade level teams with specific subject matter expertise in every content area and a fuller range of student extracurricular activities.

In interviews, each superintendent talked about their interest in a grades 6-8 middle school program to expand academic offerings and extracurriculars. Schools currently divide grades 4 from 5 in Belvidere and grades 5 and 6 in Harmony to provide some aspect of middle school type experiences. White's superintendent concurred on the desire for a unified middle school program for grades 6-8, citing the cluster's sufficient enrollment to run a middle school program. He also noted that the White Board of Education might like to host such a program.

7th and 8th grade teachers from the Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows identified the following pros and cons of a combined middle school program:⁶⁰

- Pros
 - More opportunities for athletics and student activities
 - Addition of academic departments
 - Greater opportunities to mix co-teaching
 - Better curricular alignment and flow from middle school to high school
 - Beneficial for students socially, because they have been with same children for so long and this creates a larger pool of peers
 - Additional resources such as counselors to meet student needs
- Cons
 - Class sizes could increase with consolidation, 15-18 is a sweet spot
 - The larger the school gets, the more students we could lose
 - Loss of community (i.e., township) identity

A middle school would provide a much different experience for adolescent students, both in terms of educational opportunities as well as social and emotional well-being and development. If Great Meadows joined, the middle school would have almost 500 students, which would provide an even greater opportunity for the high quality experiences that are envisioned by AMLE for middle school students.

⁶⁰ Staff interviews at Belvidere HS, 7-8-2024

Grades pK-8's with Closing Belvidere HS Option

A primary educational reason to consider closing a small high school would be concerns about the breadth and depth of the academic program that can be offered to students. It is believed that high schools with small enrollments may not have the scale to offer a comprehensive array of courses of study to provide students with sufficient challenges and opportunities in their areas of academic interest. Table 47 takes a look at the course offerings at Belvidere HS as compared to area high schools of both similar and much larger size.

TABLE 47
High School Course Offerings by Subject Area, 2024-25⁶¹

	South Hunterdon	Belvidere	Kittatinny	Hackettstown	Warren Hills	Phillipsburg
Enrollment 2023-24	248	318	525	889	1066	1799
English Language Arts	15	20	17	19	25	22
Mathematics	12	19	17	22	17	19
Science	12	16	20	20	16	24
Social Studies	12	24	15	23	17	26
World Languages	10	10	14	11	16	16
Visual & Performing Arts	10	12	14	26	27	39
Computer Science & Design Thinking	9	8	12	11	11	16
Career Readiness, Life Literacies & Key Skills	13	16	27	25	33	43
TOTAL	93	125	136	157	162	205

The data above do present a fairly straight line, where the smaller the high school, the smaller the number of general education courses offered. However, the differences between Belvidere HS and the other lower enrollment schools (South Hunterdon HS and Kittatinny HS) are modest overall and differ somewhat by subject. Even comparisons between Belvidere HS and the higher enrollment schools (Hackettstown HS, Warren Hills HS, and Phillipsburg HS) show no significant directional differences in the number of offerings in the four core subjects of English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Comparing enrollment size to course offerings, Belvidere HS has 36% of the enrollment, but offers a program of studies that is 80% of that of Hackettstown HS. Those comparisons are even more impressive when done against Warren Hills HS and Phillipsburg HS.

⁶¹ High school courses of study from district websites, general education course levels only; North Warren Regional was considered but its program of studies is structured in a way that makes these kinds of comparisons challenging

At the current level of analysis, the effects of scale do begin to appear when looking at the offerings in the four more elective areas of the curricular program. It is also important to note that this level of analysis masks important differences that would be observed through a more granular analysis of actual class schedules, as larger schools have more ability to fill sections and thus actually run the courses.

TABLE 48
Comparison of High School AP Course Offerings, 2024-25⁶²

	South Hunterdon	Belvidere	Kittatinny	Hackettstown	Warren Hills	Phillipsburg
Enrollment 2023-24	248	318	525	889	1066	1799
African American Studies	o	o	o	o	+	o
Art Studio 2D	+	o	+	+	+	+
Art Studio 3D	o	o	+	o	o	o
Art Drawing	o	o	+	o	o	o
Biology	+	+	o	+	+	+
Calculus AB	+	+	+	+	+	+
Calculus BC	o	o	+	+	o	+
Chemistry ⁶³	+	+	+	+	+	+
Comp Sci A	o	+	+	o	+	+
Comp Sci Principles	o	o	+	+	+	+
Economics	o	o	+	o	o	+
English Language	+	+	+	+	+	+
English Literature	+	+	+	+	+	+
Environmental Science	+	+	+	+	+	+
European History	o	o	+	+	+	+
French	+	o	o	o	+	+
German	o	o	o	o	+	o
Human Geography	o	o	o	o	o	+
Music Theory	o	o	+	+	o	+
Physics I	o	+	+	+	+	+

⁶² + = course is offered, o = course is not offered

⁶³ Instead of AP Chemistry, Belvidere HS offers a comparable course called College Chemistry, the same course taught at Warren County Community College

Physics 2	o	o	+	+	+	o
Physics C: E&M	o	+	+	o	o	+
Physics C: Mech	o	o	+	o	o	+
Psychology	o	+	o	o	o	+
Spanish	+	+	+	+	+	+
Statistics	+	+	+	o	+	+
US Government	o	o	+	+	+	+
US History	+	+	+	+	+	+
World History	o	o	+	+	+	+
TOTAL	11	13	23	17	20	24

TABLE 49
Comparison of High School Honors Course Offerings, 2024-25

	South Hunterdon	Belvidere	Kittatinny	Hackettstown	Warren Hills	Phillipsburg
Enrollment 2023-24	248	318	525	889	1066	1799
Accounting II	o	o	o	o	+	o
Algebra 1	o	o	+	+	o	+
Algebra 2	+	+	+	+	+	+
Anatomy & Physiology	+	+	+	o	+	+
Animal Science	o	o	o	o	o	+
Band	o	o	o	o	o	+
Biology	+	+	+	+	+	+
Business Admin	o	o	o	o	+	o
Calculus	+	+	+	o	o	+
Chemistry	+	+	+	+	+	+
Chorale	o	o	o	o	o	+
Computer Science	o	o	o	o	+	+
Concert Choir	o	o	o	o	+	+
Cybersecurity	o	o	o	o	o	+
Economics/Pers Fin	o	+	o	o	o	+
Education	o	o	o	o	o	+

English	+	+	+	+	+	+
Engineering	o	o	o	o	+	+
Environmental Science	+	o	o	+	+	o
Film Design	o	o	o	o	+	o
Forensics	o	o	+	o	o	o
French	+	o	+	o	+	+
Genetics	o	o	o	+	o	+
Geometry	+	+	+	+	+	+
German	o	o	+	o	+	o
Info Technology	o	o	o	o	o	+
Law	o	o	o	o	o	+
Mixed Choir	o	o	o	o	o	+
Music Theory	o	o	o	o	+	o
Networking	o	o	o	o	o	+
Precalculus	+	+	+	+	+	+
Physics	+	+	o	o	o	o
Plant Science	o	o	o	o	o	+
Programming	o	o	o	o	o	+
Psychology	o	o	o	o	o	+
Social Media Mktng	o	o	o	o	o	+
Spanish	+	+	+	+	+	+
Statistics	o	o	o	+	o	o
Sustainability	o	o	o	o	o	+
Theatre Arts	o	o	o	o	+	o
US History 1	+	+	+	+	+	+
US History 2	+	+	o	+	+	+
Visual Art	o	o	o	o	+	o
Wind Ensemble	o	o	o	+	+	o
World History	+	+	o	+	+	+
TOTAL	15	14	14	15	24	33

Comparing more advanced levels of general education offerings via the Honors and AP curricula, breadth of offerings does appear to increase as enrollment size grows. This is especially notable in terms of the number of AP courses offered, though the three smaller schools measure up in offering basic core AP courses such as Biology, Calculus, Chemistry, English Language, English Literature, Physics, Spanish, Statistics, and US History. In terms of Honors courses, enrollment scale in this sample does not make a significant impact on offerings until it moves over 1,000 students. Honors courses are seen across the board (in 5 or 6 out of 6 schools) in Algebra 2, Anatomy & Physiology, Biology, Chemistry, English, Geometry, Precalculus, Spanish, Statistics, and US History. Again, real class schedules would reveal the ability to run the courses at any given time, and it is presumed that larger schools have a clear advantage.

TABLE 50
Dual Credit Course Offerings, Belvidere HS, 2024-25⁶⁴

Belvidere HS Course	Warren CCC Course	College Credits
College Level Chemistry	CHE 164 General Chemistry	4
AP Psychology	PSY 101 Intro to Psychology	3
AP Statistics	MAT 151 Statistics	3
Introduction to Business	BUS 120 Business Org. & Mgmt.	3
Forensic Science	CRJ 107 Forensic Science	4
AP US History	HIS 113 American History	3
College Algebra	MAT 131 College Algebra	3
English 2 Honors	ENG 140 English Composition I	3
English 2 CP	ENG 140 English Composition I	3
English 3 Honors	ENG 141 English Composition II	3
English 3 CP	ENG 141 English Composition II	3
Spanish 3 Honors	FOR 101 Beginning Spanish I	3
Spanish 4 Honors	FOR 151 Beginning Spanish II	3
AP Spanish Language	FOR 201 & 251 Int. Span. I & II	6
AP Biology	BIO 162 & BIO 163 Gen Bio I & II	8
AP Calculus AB	MAT 201 Calculus	4
Honors Biology	BIO 145 Principles of Biology	4

⁶⁴ Dual credit agreement with Warren CCC for all except Social Media Marketing (Centenary University)

Honors Pre-Calculus	MAT 141 Precalculus	3
AP Physics	PHY 111 College Physics I	4
Honors Chemistry	CHE 110 Intro to Chemistry	4
Social Media Marketing	BUS 2050 Social Media Marketing	4

Each high school offers dual credit courses, which provide opportunities for students to earn high school credits and college credits at the same time. Belvidere has a robust program with 21 courses offering a potential total of 79 college credits. While these courses may not be offered in a manner that all possible credits can be achieved by one student, it provides more than enough choice and opportunity to allow students to get a tremendous head start toward college graduation.

Based on this analysis, Belvidere HS’s enrollment size has not provided an impediment to offering a reasonably broad and deep curriculum with many options to challenge and provide academic opportunities to its students. Its program of studies compares favorably to similarly sized high schools in the area and, in some ways, even to ones with much larger enrollments.

15. Other Instructional Resources

Class Sizes

The State has identified suggested maximum class sizes of 21 for grades K-5, 23 for grades 6-8, and 24 for grades 9-12. The data below reveals the differentiation not only between districts but even within them. Regionalization of the districts may allow for decisions on more efficient placement or sharing of teaching staff. This is a challenge especially for districts with one school and for those with low enrollment schools, who often have just one or two classrooms per grade level. It makes it hard to attain efficiencies in personnel allocation and student to teacher ratios. For the most part, however, the data shows that all districts in the study are generally below, at, or at least close to those suggested maximums. White’s class sizes are more balanced overall and much lower than the state’s suggested maximums, which can help create the conditions for more personalized instruction.

TABLE 51
Average Class Sizes, 2023-24⁶⁵

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Kindergarten	17	11	10	16	22
Grade 1	19	19	15	17	20
Grade 2	18	14	9	16	26
Grade 3	23	14	16	16	21
Grade 4	16	18	13	13	24
Grade 5	27	22	16	13	24
Grade 6	27	30	12	13	24
Grade 7	13	19	16	12	24
Grade 8	22	20	9	14	20
ELA 9	14				
ELA 10	16				
ELA 11	13				
ELA 12	15				

Length of School Day and Instructional Time

TABLE 52
Length of School Day and Instructional Time, 2022-23⁶⁶

	Belvidere HS	Belvidere ES	Harmony ES	Hope ES	White ES	Central ES	Gr Mead MS
Length of school day	6:40	6:40	6:40	6:30	6:15	6:35	6:35
Instructional time during the school day	5:36	6:00	5:50	5:45	5:45	5:55	5:55

Belvidere HS uses a rotating block schedule with a 40 minute lunch and does not count passing times or homeroom toward its instructional time. All of the elementary schools use a more traditional seven period schedule with a 40-50 minute lunch/recess and varied middle grades schedules depending on the school. In general, these instructional times are not inconsistent with other districts in the area. However, the alignment of the school day and instructional day across the

⁶⁵ Grades K-8 class sizes are based on homerooms, grades 9-12 are based on ELA class sizes

⁶⁶ School websites and district provided information

districts, or in an all purpose regional district, would provide a more even playing field for all students in these schools.

Student Access to Technology and Internet Connectivity

TABLE 53
Percentages of Students with Technology Devices, 2022-23⁶⁷

	Belvidere HS	Belvidere ES	Harmony ES	Hope ES	White ES	Central ES	GM MS
Student to device ratio	1.0	1.7	1.0	2.9	1.1	1.0	1.1
Personal device for remote learning	1.7%	1.9%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
School provided device for remote learning	47.2%	18.3%	0.5%	96.4%	100.0%	99.7%	100.0%
Device with unknown owner for remote learning ⁶⁸	37.6%	39.3%	99.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%
No device for remote learning	13.4%	40.5%	0.0%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Chromebooks or Laptops	48.7%	16.4%	0.5%	97.1%	100.0%	99.7%	100.0%
Tablets or iPads	0.3%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Unknown type of device	37.6%	39.3%	99.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%

TABLE 54
Percentages of Students with Internet Connectivity, 2022-23⁶⁹

	Belvidere HS	Belvidere ES	Harmony ES	Hope ES	White ES	Central ES	GM MS
Personal access	47.5%	20.6%	0.5%	0.0%	100.0%	99.7%	100.0%
Access through district paid data plan	1.7%	1.1%	0.0%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Access through district managed wireless network	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	82.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Unknown type of internet connectivity	50.7%	78.2%	99.5%	15.3%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%

⁶⁷ NJDOE Student Access to Technology and Internet Connectivity Report, 2022-23

⁶⁸ This may be a shared computer at home versus the student having a personal device

⁶⁹ This is a relatively new collection item, and the data here suggests varied understandings of the request

All of the districts have made significant investments in technology with at least a 1.0 to 1 student to device ratio. In districts that report a 1.0 to 1 device initiative but show fewer than 100% of students having a school-issued device, it is possible that families prefer to have their child use a personal device even though a district device is available. It is notable that 40% of Belvidere ES students do not have access to a device for remote learning. This may be less relevant for primary grade (K-3) students, though there is a desire to have students become savvy with information technology earlier in their school careers than ever before. Also, the pandemic demonstrated the need for schools to be able to pivot quickly and effectively to remote instruction in an emergent situation.

16. Performance Measures

State Assessment Scores (aggregated)

Standardized assessments provide a common metric for assessing the academic performance of students across different schools or districts. The State has adopted several assessments over the past two decades and is using the NJ Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA) presently. NJSLA allows for a standardized evaluation of how well students are mastering key concepts and skills as outlined in the NJSLS in the subjects of ELA, Math, and Science. Tables 55 through 60 indicate the percentage of total students meeting or exceeding expectations in each area by grade level and/or subject area in the 2018-19, 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. Due to the impact of the pandemic on schools, statewide assessments in NJ were suspended during the spring of 2020 and 2021, hence no data is available.

TABLE 55
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA ELA Expectations, 2019⁷⁰

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows	State Average
Grade 3	35%	40%	33%	54%	61%	50%
Grade 4	33%	50%	64%	32%	66%	57%
Grade 5	33%	48%	75%	63%	78%	58%
Grade 6	14%	60%	64%	55%	66%	56%
Grade 7	50%	32%	89%	80%	69%	63%
Grade 8	36%	45%	73%	74%	72%	63%
Grade 9	63%					56%

⁷⁰ An asterisk (*) indicates that due to accountability calculations, data was not made public for groups of less than 20 students.

TABLE 56
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA ELA Expectations, 2022

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows	State Average
Grade 3	32%	19%	17%	42%	61%	42%
Grade 4	27%	60%	44%	45%	28%	49%
Grade 5	21%	25%	*	78%	35%	50%
Grade 6	24%	48%	*	55%	41%	48%
Grade 7	35%	45%	46%	46%	48%	53%
Grade 8	30%	36%	57%	63%	36%	51%
Grade 9	35%					49%

TABLE 57
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA ELA Expectations, 2023

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows	State Average
Grade 3	14%	*	50%	77%	60%	42%
Grade 4	24%	50%	58%	39%	51%	51%
Grade 5	13%	50%	77%	55%	36%	53%
Grade 6	*	39%	50%	79%	29%	49%
Grade 7	30%	50%	55%	75%	46%	56%
Grade 8	38%	50%	62%	41%	23%	55%
Grade 9	36%					52%

TABLE 58
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA Math Expectations, 2019

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows	State Average
Grade 3	30%	40%	67%	57%	82%	55%
Grade 4	29%	61%	73%	33%	60%	51%
Grade 5	17%	41%	58%	56%	70%	47%
Grade 6	11%	30%	36%	58%	49%	41%
Grade 7	41%	17%	53%	44%	51%	42%
Grade 8	*	*	*	13%	53%	29%

Algebra I MS	62%				100%	42%
Algebra I HS	10%					
Geometry	42%					35%
Algebra II	16%					58%

TABLE 59
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA Math Expectations, 2022

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows	State Average
Grade 3	36%	48%	17%	46%	61%	45%
Grade 4	27%	48%	19%	45%	28%	39%
Grade 5	*	30%	*	41%	35%	36%
Grade 6	12%	22%	*	52%	41%	31%
Grade 7	39%	45%	46%	36%	48%	34%
Grade 8	*	*	*	*	36%	15%
Algebra I MS	*	75%	*	67%	91%	35%
Algebra I HS	*					
Geometry	41%					50%
Algebra II	*					66%

TABLE 60
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA Math Expectations, 2023

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows	State Average
Grade 3	29%	37%	36%	82%	60%	46%
Grade 4	33%	55%	*	32%	51%	44%
Grade 5	24%	32%	39%	36%	36%	40%
Grade 6	16%	50%	30%	58%	29%	34%
Grade 7	15%	55%	27%	59%	46%	34%
Grade 8	*	*	*	*	23%	18%
Algebra I MS	67%	*	*	40%	78%	35%
Algebra I HS	*					
Geometry	39%					55%
Algebra II	*					66%

The impact of the pandemic on standardized test scores has been deep but varied depending on multiple factors, including the level of disruption to education, the availability of resources for remote learning, and the effectiveness of mitigation strategies implemented by schools and districts. To a great extent, statewide assessment scores among these districts have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, although more work is needed.

There remain significant disparities among the elementary assessment scores in both ELA and Math at various grade levels. This adds further evidence to the recommendations in the previous sections on the desirability of better curriculum coordination, common philosophies and instructional materials, and similar instructional time devoted to academic work.

State Assessment Scores (disaggregated)

Achievement gaps in standardized test scores refer to persistent disparities in academic performance between different groups of students. The gaps between racial/ethnic majority and minority students, or between wealthier students and their less economically advantaged peers, are evident in both pre- and post-pandemic scores. These persistent gaps are also observed along the lines of gender and ability.

TABLE 61
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA ELA Expectations
Disaggregated by Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Ability, and Income, 2019

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
White	49%	46%	65%	61%	70%
Asian	*	*	*	*	*
Black	*	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	39%	*	*	58%	67%
Multi-Racial	55%	*	*	*	*
Female	57%	61%	79%	73%	76%
Male	38%	29%	53%	45%	62%
Students with Disabilities	*	*	18%	21%	35%
Economically Disadvantaged	27%	21%	61%	46%	69%

Addressing achievement gaps requires that schools provide targeted support and resources to underserved students and communities, encourage a focus on culturally responsive teaching practices, and implement policies that foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students. A more consistent program in ELA and Math, beginning in the younger grades, would yield more common student experiences and would potentially result in more productive

professional learning communities, where teachers examine assessment data and the corresponding instructional strategies that generated those results.

TABLE 62
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA ELA Expectations
Disaggregated by Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Ability, and Income, 2022

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
White	31%	41%	43%	55%	70%
Asian	*	*	*	*	*
Black	*	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	25%	*	*	40%	67%
Multi-Racial	*	*	*	50%	*
Female	36%	43%	44%	61%	76%
Male	27%	37%	37%	46%	62%
Students with Disabilities	16%	15%	21%	17%	35%
Economically Disadvantaged	*	*	*	47%	69%

TABLE 63
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA ELA Expectations
Disaggregated by Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Ability, and Income, 2023

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
White	27%	40%	60%	64%	57%
Asian	*	*	*	*	50%
Black	*	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	36%	55%	*	18%	54%
Multi-Racial	18%	*	*	54%	62%
Female	30%	42%	59%	68%	64%
Male	23%	40%	57%	51%	49%
Students with Disabilities	11%	<10%	32%	27%	20%
Economically Disadvantaged	17%	40%	*	32%	38%

TABLE 64
 Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA Math Expectations
 Disaggregated by Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Ability, and Income, 2019

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
White	28%	36%	57%	49%	62%
Asian	*	*	*	*	*
Black	*	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	*	*	*	25%	55%
Multi-Racial	20%	*	*	*	*
Female	27%	39%	62%	43%	63%
Male	26%	31%	53%	50%	62%
Students with Disabilities	*	15%	*	21%	31%
Economically Disadvantaged	*	39%	44%	46%	49%

TABLE 65
 Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA Math Expectations
 Disaggregated by Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Ability, and Income, 2022

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
White	21%	39%	36%	43%	46%
Asian	*	*	*	*	64%
Black	*	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	11%	*	36%	30%	32%
Multi-Racial	*	*	*	40%	42%
Female	16%	35%	33%	40%	45%
Male	23%	39%	31%	43%	44%
Students with Disabilities	16%	<10%	21%	17%	17%
Economically Disadvantaged	*	*	*	12%	27%

TABLE 66
 Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding NJSLA Math Expectations
 Disaggregated by Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Ability, and Income, 2023

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
White	24%	45%	35%	46%	45%
Asian	*	*	*	*	40%
Black	*	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	19%	27%	*	25%	39%
Multi-Racial	10%	*	*	67%	46%
Female	19%	47%	27%	51%	47%
Male	25%	40%	41%	43%	40%
Students with Disabilities	12%	<10%	23%	18%	<10%
Economically Disadvantaged	13%	40%	*	27%	30%

Student Growth Scores

In their simplest form, student growth scores are a measure of how much student learning is increasing above standard expectations over a given period of time. NJ uses a median student growth percentile (mSGP) model to indicate growth on statewide ELA and Math assessments. This mSGP is derived from each individual’s student growth percentile (SGP) for ELA in grades 4-8 and for Math in grades 4-7. The SGP measures a student’s academic progress from one year to the next compared to other students with similar prior test scores. Members of this similar group are called a student’s academic peers, and the mSGP is the median score among those peers.

The mSGP falls between 1 and 99 and is separated into three levels. An mSGP below 35 indicates low growth, an mSGP between 35 and 65 indicates typical growth, and an mSGP greater than 65 indicates high growth.

The calculation of mSGPs relies on two consecutive years of assessment results to calculate individual student growth percentiles. Due to the cancellation of the NJLSA in both 2019-20 and 2020-21, SGPs were not calculated for 2019-20, 2020-21, or 2021-22. mSGPs from other school years for each district are shown in Tables 67 and 68.

TABLE 67
Median Student Growth Percentiles for ELA, 2018-19 to 2022-23⁷¹

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
2018-19	37	48	65	57	42
2022-23	29	40	78	56	50

TABLE 68
Median Student Growth Percentiles for Math, 2018-19 to 2022-23

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
2018-19	30	59	65	60	43
2022-23	48	60	67	45	51

Districts achieving mSGP scores between 40.0-59.5 are considered as having met the federal accountability standard. The 2022-23 mSGPs indicate that student growth met or exceeded that standard with the one exception of the Belvidere ES ELA results. These are limited snapshots that will be worth attention in future years.

The range of student growth scores provides an opportunity for district leaders, working within a regional setting, to examine the programs and instructional practices that are yielding the highest levels of student growth demonstrated in ELA and Math. By combining district- and building-level supervisory staff and reassigning responsibilities closely aligned to areas of expertise, a regional school district can better serve and provide targeted support to the teachers preparing students to meet or exceed academic standards and leave high school ready for college and careers.

College and Career Readiness Assessments

Much like we have seen with other assessments, Tables 69 to 71 show the multifaceted effects of the pandemic on college readiness assessments such as the SAT and AP tests. Many students faced challenges in accessing resources and preparing for exams during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, while others were impacted during the years leading up to their scheduled exam, even as school returned to more normal schedules. Belvidere HS was no different.

⁷¹ The expected mSGP is at the 50th percentile, so scores above the 50th are better than expected and below are lower than expected

TABLE 69
SAT Reading & Writing Scores, Belvidere HS, 2019-23

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
School Average	531	530	526	560	528
State Average	539	536	557	538	533
% at or above CRB ⁷²	76%	77%	79%	89%	72%
State Average	70%	69%	76%	68%	67%

TABLE 70
SAT Math Scores, Belvidere HS, 2019-23

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
School Average	522	519	509	535	505
State Average	541	536	560	532	525
% at or above CRB ⁷³	51%	49%	46%	56%	44%
State Average	53%	52%	60%	49%	48%

TABLE 71
Advanced Placement Scores, Belvidere HS, 2019-23

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of AP Students	123	137	79	99	94
Number of AP Exams	235	260	145	192	169
AP Students with Scores of 3+	107	101	50	62	69
% of AP Students with Scores of 3+	87%	74%	63%	63%	73%

Graduation

Belvidere HS is the only school in this study that awards high school diplomas and reports the post-high school plans of its students. Its graduation data, across 4-year and 5-year cohorts are noted in Tables 72 and 73. Belvidere HS had higher graduation rates than the state average for each of the 4-year and 5-year cohorts from 2021-2023.

⁷² Reading & Writing CRB (college readiness benchmark) is 480

⁷³ Math CRB is 530

TABLE 72
Graduation Rates, Belvidere HS, 2020-23

	2020 cohort		2021 cohort		2022 cohort		2023 cohort	
	School	State	School	State	School	State	School	State
4-yr graduation	n/a	n/a	94.1%	90.6%	96.9%	90.9%	92.1%	91.1%
5-yr graduation	98.2%	92.6%	94.7%	92.5%	96.9%	92.7%	n/a	n/a

TABLE 73
4-Year Graduation Cohort Profile, Belvidere HS, Cohort 2023⁷⁴

	Belvidere HS	State Average
Schoolwide	92.1%	91.1%
White	93.8%	95.0%
Hispanic	90.9%	85.8%
Black	*	86.7%
Asian	*	96.7%
Native	*	89.6%
Two or More Races	*	93.0%
Female	94.4%	93.1%
Male	89.4%	89.1%
Students with Disabilities	91.7%	80.5%
Economically Disadvantaged	84.6%	86.6%
English Language Learners	*	73.6%

An examination of graduation rates by student subgroups is also important to get a complete picture of the performance of the high school in meeting the needs of all of its students. Given the small enrollment at Belvidere HS, it is not surprising that several subgroups do not have enough students to meet the threshold for revealing data publicly. However, for those subgroups with sufficient enrollment, Belvidere HS is graduating students at or above the state average in most cases, which compares favorably to the total graduation rate between it and the state average. In the case of

⁷⁴ An asterisk (*) indicates that due to accountability calculations, data was not made public for groups of less than 20 students.

students with disabilities, the school is doing quite well in preparing its students to meet their graduation requirements and earn their diplomas.

Postsecondary Enrollment

Table 74 documents the Belvidere HS postsecondary enrollment rates by the percentage of graduates that have enrolled in any institution and 4-year institutions within 16 months of graduating from high school for each of the last three years. As the table demonstrates, Belvidere HS is above the state average for the Class of 2022.

TABLE 74
Postsecondary Enrollment Rates, Belvidere HS, 2020-22⁷⁵

	Class of 2020	Class of 2021	Class of 2022	State Average Class of 2022
% Enrolled in 4-year Institution	58.5%	63.2%	76.6%	72.0%
% Enrolled in Any Postsecondary Institution	63.1%	73.0%	81.9 - 84.4%	75.1 - 77.4%

Chronic Absenteeism

TABLE 75
Chronic Absenteeism Rates, 2019-23⁷⁶

	Belvidere HS	Belvidere ES	Harmony ES	Hope ES	White ES	Central ES	Gr Mead MS
2018-19	9.6%	15.0%	8.1%	3.2%	6.1%	7.7%	5.4%
2020-21	18.8%	7.2%	15.2%	5.5%	8.2%	4.6%	7.8%
2021-22	28.4%	35.8%	40.3%	7.8%	14.1%	9.7%	14.5%
2022-23	18.5%	25.9%	15.8%	15.7%	18.8%	18.6%	13.8%

Chronic absenteeism refers to a situation where a student misses 10% or more of the school year for almost any reason excused or unexcused. This can have a profound impact on education due to missed instructional time and lost opportunities for social interaction and the development of social skills. Students who are frequently absent tend to have lower academic achievement compared to their peers who attend school regularly. Chronic absenteeism has been linked to higher dropout rates

⁷⁵ NJDOE reported a range for overall postsecondary enrollment for the Class of 2022; the lower bound of the range is the percentage of students who were matched by the National Student Clearinghouse; the upper bound of the range represents an estimate of the percentage of students that may have enrolled, given the potential reasons that students may not be matched

⁷⁶ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, NJDOE received a federal waiver which removed the requirement to report on chronic absenteeism and related accountability measures for the 2019-20 school year

as students who are frequently absent may become disengaged from school, leading them to eventually disenroll before completing their education. This can have long-term consequences for their future opportunities and success.

The rates of chronic absenteeism for the school districts involved in this study are presented in Table 75. NJDOE recommends caution in comparing the 2022-23 chronic absenteeism rates with rates from prior years as the pandemic has impacted attendance rates. Depending on the years examined, the data shows little consistency. It could be beneficial for the districts in the region to examine the strategies being employed by each one to see where improvements may be made.

Student Discipline

Table 76 indicates how many incidents of violence, vandalism, HIB, and substance offenses were reported per 100 students, and the percentages of students serving suspensions during the 2022-23 school year. This information is reported as a means of giving as complete a dataset as possible, but safety and discipline reporting is district specific and prone to widely varying interpretations by school leaders.

TABLE 76
Safety and Disciplinary Data, 2022-23

	Belvidere HS	Belvidere ES	Harmony ES	Hope ES	White ES	Central ES	Gr Mead MS
Violence, Vandalism, HIB, and Substance Offenses ⁷⁷	5.25	0.76	0.53	3.65	4.03	0.00	2.31
% of Students Serving In-School Suspensions	10.2%	0.4%	0.0%	0.7%	5.1%	0.0%	1.7%
% of Students Serving Out-of-School Suspensions	5.2%	2.3%	0.5%	1.5%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%

Insights

The assessment results and other performance measures presented in this domain are often directly linked to curricular programs, teaching methods and strategies, and school climate and culture, each of which is also inextricably linked to the others.

Additional alignment of curriculum programs, professional learning, and climate and culture initiatives that can result from regionalization or carefully planned shared services may provide the following benefits:

⁷⁷ Per 100 students

- Shared academic programs, including curriculum, resources, and teaching strategies, provide students with more consistent academic experiences, which in turn, can better prepare students for state assessments, particularly as they progress through grade levels and into departmentalized programs in middle and high school. Regionalization or shared services allow these programs to fall under a single umbrella of supervision, increasing the likelihood of increased consistency.
- Equity issues, as evidenced by achievement gaps in assessment scores, graduation rates, and discipline outcomes, can be addressed in a more efficient manner when a professional or group of professionals are charged with minding those issues. These efforts are more readily obtainable in a streamlined, efficient system.
- School attendance and discipline rates are frequently directly related to school climate and culture. Small school districts often do not have the manpower to conduct necessary work around climate and culture. Regionalization and shared services allow that important work to be centralized, benefiting all students in the region.

17. Special Programs

Special Education

Tables 77, 78, and 79 provide breakdowns of special education classifications, placements, and services for each school district. An obvious sign of the collaboration between Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White is that they share one special services director who oversees the child study teams (CSTs) for the entire cluster. Some of the successes and challenges with the shared arrangements were identified by the director as:⁷⁸

- Each district has different CST setups (i.e., one team for Harmony-Belvidere and one team for White-Hope with minimal crossover) with some individuals being part-time. Building-specific teams have worked well.
- Counseling services are provided by school social workers and school psychologists, which stretches the capacity of those personnel fairly thin.
- There is some as-needed sharing but nothing formal or sustained. The director is beginning to make inroads to create better cohesiveness.
- Each district has its own way of doing things and its own philosophies. Changing mindsets and practices continues to be a challenge.

⁷⁸ Staff interviews at Belvidere HS, 7-8-2024

TABLE 77
Special Education Classification and Placement Data, 2023-24⁷⁹

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Students Classified In-District	113	41	37	35	130
Students Classified Out-of-District	4	1	1	2	3
% Classified of District Enrollment	19.6%	22.3%	27.2%	13.4%	20.0%
% Placed In-District	96.6%	97.6%	97.4%	94.6%	97.7%

TABLE 78
Students in Special Education Classifications, 2023-24⁸⁰

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Auditory Impairment	1	0	0	0	0
Autistic	8	2	5	5	13
Communication Impairment	9	3	3	4	22
Emotional Regulation Impairment	6	0	1	0	1
Mild Intellectual Disability	0	1	0	1	1
Moderate Intellectual Disability	3	0	0	0	0
Multiple Disabilities	6	0	1	0	1
Orthopedic Impairment	0	0	0	0	0
Other Health Impairment	24	4	10	5	18
Preschool with Disabilities	9	4	2	4	13
Specific Learning Disability	39	19	9	4	41
Speech and Language Impairment	7	7	6	12	20
Traumatic Brain Injury	1	0	0	0	0
Visual Impairment	0	1	0	0	0

⁷⁹ NJSMART Special Education Placement Profile, 2023-24, out-of-district placement numbers from school district student information systems

⁸⁰ Data in this table and the following one include only students placed in-district

TABLE 79
Students Receiving Related Services

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Occupational Therapy	29	16	22	12	48
Physical Therapy	6	0	6	4	15
Speech Therapy	33	26	23	27	85
Counseling Services ⁸¹	4	2	0	0	17
Other Related Services	21	4	3	8	49

White’s classification rate of 13.4% is significantly lower than the other elementary schools.⁸² While it may be true that student needs are quite different at each school, it is more likely that the unique practices and philosophies of the districts may lead to variance in eligibility criteria for classification and IEP development. It is recommended that the districts look to align their criteria to decrease the transition issues that the high school or a unified middle school program would face.

Looking more deeply into the categories for insight on White’s low classification rate, there are a small number of students classified with specific learning disabilities (SLDs), which tend to be the category with the highest numbers. SLD is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in a reduced ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Students with an SLD are often placed in general education classes staffed with two co-teachers or the support of an instructional assistant. In addition, or sometimes instead of these arrangements, students may receive what is known as pull-out support. Either way it involves the commitment of significant personnel resources. Effective multi-tiered systems of support often result in fewer students needing to be classified with SLDs, because their learning needs can be addressed in the general education setting with less intensive use of human resources. This will be addressed more specifically in the section that follows on intervention programs.

The high rates of in-district placements speak well of each district’s efforts to be effective and efficient while educating students in their home schools with their non-disabled peers. The director offered thoughts on the feasibility of operating more in-house for students currently on OOD placements or targeting more specific needs for in-district placements, if the schools in the region operated more cohesively:

⁸¹ This counseling is typically provided by child study team members, in addition to the guidance services all students receive

⁸² Belvidere’s classification rate is for grades pK-12; high school rates tend to be lower as students experience the benefits of special education and are declassified; for comparison with the other elementary schools, Belvidere ES’s classification rate is 24.4%

- There are a few OOD students, who have severe autism, whose needs cannot currently be met in-district, and they probably couldn't be regardless of organizational changes;
- There is an open question as to whether there is space available to house programs that bring students from other districts into the cluster;
- CST members are part of the larger team but located in a school, and they manage cases within that school; and
- They could consider reducing some of the multiple disabilities programs by consolidating operations.

The districts each offer the following in-district special education programs: preschool integrated with special and general education students, multiple disabilities at all levels, pull-out resource replacement, and in-class resource support. Depending on the number of students in any given year, efficiencies may be found in consolidating one or more of these programs into one or even two of the elementary schools. This could be especially helpful if the students will all be attending the same middle school program as of 6th grade.

The Belvidere Cluster uses 23 individual contracted service providers (Belvidere 4, Harmony 7, Hope 4, and White 8) to provide occupational, physical, and speech therapies because they do not have the capacity to add full-time members to their staff. Part-time therapists are hard to find as they can work more hours for a contracted service organization. Great Meadows operates similarly. These services are often less costly to address the needs of the students at one particular school but are typically more costly on a per hour basis when looking across a cluster or region. Efficient allocation of full-time personnel, effective services, and lower overall costs could be achieved by sharing personnel or through consolidation as one all purpose, pK-12 regional district.

The following summaries highlight individual aspects of special education programs and personnel provided in each district that may be considered for greater collaboration.

Belvidere

Belvidere operates comprehensive special education services for its pK-12 students. The elementary multiple disabilities programs are separated for grades K-3 and 4-8, and are judged internally to be quite strong. Belvidere HS houses a transition program for four 18-21 year old students using Project Hire as an external provider. The district is working on establishing a complementary life skills program at the high school. OOD placements at the high school level are made either due to severe autism or severe behavioral issues. One teacher has certification as an applied behavior analyst (ABA) and another has Level 2 Wilson reading certification. There are seventeen personal aides employed by the district.

Harmony

As a smaller school district, Harmony has looked to more strategic than tactical solutions to address the needs of its students. The school has shifted from a largely pull-out resource to a comprehensive co-teaching model in grades K-5 in all core subjects, focused predominantly on Math and ELA. There are two teachers in each K-5 classroom all day, and the co-teacher is able to provide that resource level instruction in the more inclusive general education setting. The school is bringing back one OOD student to its in-district emotional regulation impairment program. The district employs one personal aide.

Hope

As another small school district, Hope has had to work hard to focus its resources, and has been successful in integrating special needs students into the mainstream classrooms. It has a SLD program that has been successful due to having an excellent teacher in charge of the classroom, which tends to be true for other smaller schools. The district employs two personal aides.

White

Like Belvidere, White has strong multiple disabilities programs with grades K-3 and 4-8 separated into unique classrooms. Two elementary students from White attend the multiple disabilities program in Belvidere. The district employs two personal aides.

Great Meadows

The shared director of special services works only for the Belvidere Cluster districts. Great Meadows shared a director with Hackettstown until 2020, and the current superintendent has assumed that role since. The district has a continuum of programs from grades pK-8, including self-contained ones for autism/multiple disabilities in grades K-3 and 4-8, for SLDs in grades K-3 and 4-8, and for emotional regulation impairment in grades 4-8 (K-3 is unnecessary at this time). The pull-out resource program is considered strong, and there appears to be little appetite to change it. The district employs one full CST and contracts out for occupational, physical, and behavioral therapies. A concern is that the district does not provide as much in-class support and co-teaching as the educators would like to see. Another is that severely cognitively impaired students are sent OOD and the district would like to bring back as many into the district as possible. The superintendent noted an extraordinarily high number of students are placed out-of-district at Hackettstown HS.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Often tied to education laws and regulations that require schools to provide support for struggling students, multi-tiered systems of support is a framework used in schools to proactively identify and assist students who need help academically, behaviorally, or socially. The three-tiered system ranges from Tier 1 universal supports, which begins with high-quality classroom programming for all students, to Tiers 2 and 3 targeted supports, which can take the form of small group or individual

interventions. All identification and support is driven by data from screenings and progress monitoring to determine which interventions are working and which need adjustment.

Intervention and referral services (I&RS) are the vehicle used by NJ's pK-12 schools to support students who are experiencing academic, behavioral, or health difficulties that may be impacting their educational performance. The purpose of I&RS, known in some schools as a RTI committee, is to identify and assist students who are struggling before their issues escalate to the point of requiring more intensive interventions or special education classification. The process typically involves the identification of students at risk, followed by an assessment of the needs of those students. Once the needs are determined, the team develops an action plan that outlines the implementation of services they believe will support the student's success and then monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of those interventions, adjusting the plan as necessary. The multidisciplinary I&RS team typically includes teachers, counselors, administrators, and sometimes parents.

Belvidere

At Belvidere ES, teachers and counselors complete a referral for assistance on the school's LinkIt! portal. This goes to the RTI Committee where the cases are scheduled and discussed at a weekly committee meeting. Academic screening is done using tools from Renaissance to verify needs. As of Spring 2024, intervention services were being provided to ten students. Interventions vary by grade level, for example, with Orton Gillingham used for grades K-2 ELA phonemic awareness and Foundations used for Grade 3. Read Naturally and parts of Leveled Learning Instruction are used to promote fluency and/or comprehension in Grades 3-4.

At Belvidere HS, similar referrals are made to the Committee, which generates action at a committee meeting. Intervention services address academics and behavior and typically involve a teacher/coach, counselor, or peer tutor as an academic or behavioral coach. Staff members are paid to provide this service. As of Spring 2024, intervention services were being provided to ten students.

The superintendent noted that the program is good overall but can use some tinkering. He stated that teachers demonstrate their care by routinely looking for a variety of support mechanisms to meet the needs of different students.

Harmony

At Harmony ES, any staff member can make a referral to the I&RS Team for any reason. The referral process involves a simple form describing the staff member's concerns and the student's strengths. The Team includes the following members: the principal, nurse, counselor, RTI teachers, a special education teacher, a specials teacher, the referring staff member and the learning disabilities teacher consultant (CST member). The RTI program is staffed by a literacy teacher, a mathematics teacher, and a paraprofessional.

The team constructs an intervention plan for 30, 45, 60, or 90 days and monitors the student's progress. All Tier 1 interventions occur within the classroom, whereas Tiers 2 and 3 are pull-out

interventions. At the conclusion of the assigned intervention, the Team reconvenes to determine if further services are needed or there needs to be a referral to the CST. During the 2023-24 school year, eight students were referred to the Team and three students were subsequently referred to the CST, each of whom was classified.

The superintendent saw the support system as strong in that it is run by a great teacher, there are resources devoted to a pullout for RTI, and last year saw improvements in the I&RS program.

Hope

Hope's process operates similarly to that described above for Harmony. Academic screening is done through a pre-assessment using existing assessment systems such as Words their Way or NWEA MAP. Unfortunately, the RTI teacher position has been eliminated, and that work is being handled for now by the principal. Hope is trying to keep Tier 1 and 2 services in the classroom and work diligently with Tier 3 students with 2 days Math and 2 days of ELA support. As of February 2024, nineteen students were receiving interventions through the I&RS Team.

White

The White I&RS Committee operates similarly to those described above. The Committee meets monthly and includes the reading specialist, guidance counselor, teacher in charge, referring teacher, and chief school administrator. The screening tool is DIBELS for ELA and LinkIt for other needs. All grade levels have a 30 minute RTI period daily. For Grades K-4, classroom teachers deliver support, and a reading specialist pulls small groups of students requiring more intensive support. For Grades 5-8, all students have a 30 minute RTI period at the end of the day where students receive remediation and enrichment. Math and ELA teachers provide help to students in need, and other staff provide students with enrichment during this period.

Great Meadows

The Great Meadows I&RS process is similar to others previously described. The district uses DIBELS as an academic screener for ELA and is looking into a universal screener for Math.

English Language Learner Programs

Each of the districts must adhere to NJ administrative code for bilingual education when crafting programming and schedules for students.⁸³ The low numbers of ELL students in these schools do not require a full bilingual program, but eligible students must receive either English language services (ELS) or an English as a second language (ESL) program. These could perhaps be more effectively or efficiently serviced by existing staff if united into one all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district or a grades 6-8 combined middle school program.

⁸³ N.J.A.C. 6A:15

The programs in these districts are typical of the operations in other NJ districts. ELLs enrolling in the district are given the WIDA screener to determine their level of English language acquisition. Those results provide information as to what services to offer, which include the following:

- One period, 3-4 days per week, where students work with a staff member on English language acquisition through their assigned classwork;
- An academic coach during the school year to assist with learning English and with classwork assigned by the teachers;
- Regular communication between the school counselor, teachers, parents, and the student;
- Extended time on school work and tests;
- Use of a translation application;
- Allow students to write answers in Spanish or English during the transition to all English;
- Repeat and clarify directions; and
- Extended school year tutoring classes two days a week for two hours each day for two months, if the family's schedule allows.

Gifted and Talented Education

Just like students with learning disabilities and English language learners, the learning needs of gifted and talented students are addressed in state administrative code.⁸⁴ The law codifying school district responsibilities⁸⁵ states that they must establish a process to identify students as gifted and talented using multiple measures, and that these students require modification to their educational program if they are to achieve in accordance with their capabilities.⁸⁶ The programs below show some similarities and some differences in their approaches and the number of students involved. Similar to the recommendations made for special education, a unified approach in one all purpose, grades pK-12 regional district or a combined grades 6-8 middle school program could offer more expanded and cohesive program opportunities to more children using existing staff.

Belvidere ES offers a program called “2XL Extended Learners”, the purpose of which is to challenge students in grades K-8 above and beyond the classroom environment. The program offers enrichment activities for all students in grades K-8 throughout the year via the Warren County Consortium for Student Enrichment. Students are separated into two groups: gifted/talented and enrichment. There are three faculty members assigned to guide the groups through their learning activities.

⁸⁴ N.J.A.C. 6A:8

⁸⁵ P.L.2020, c.338

⁸⁶ NJ Student Learning Standards

Belvidere HS provides “Extended Learners”, a gifted program for high school students with exceptional academic qualities. There is a rigorous screening process, where teacher recommendations, grades, and standardized test scores are used. The students participate in events such as Consumer Bowl and the Warren-Hunterdon Academic Meet, a semi-annual academic competition contested amongst the high schools of Warren and Hunterdon Counties. Currently there are 23 members (12th grade = 11, 11th grade = 12, 10th grade = 2 pending paperwork, 9th grade to be assessed in 2024-25).

Harmony’s gifted and talented program addressed the needs of sixteen students during the 2023-24 academic year. The school also had eleven students participate in Teen Arts, a county wide program for talented artistic, musical, and theatrical performers in 7th and 8th grades.

Hope and Great Meadows offer gifted and talented education through an integrated model combined with RTI.

White has a part-time gifted and talented teacher, who currently supports 11 students in the program. The students participate in the Warren County Consortium for Enrichment events, and the teacher meets with students one or two times per week to provide enrichment opportunities. The teacher also provides weekly lessons to all students in Grades K-2.

18. Extracurricular Programs

A healthy extracurricular program provides balance to an academic education by offering activities that engage student interest. Despite its small enrollment, Belvidere HS offers 20 interscholastic athletic programs and 21 student clubs. The athletic offerings include: archery, baseball, basketball (girls and boys), bowling, cheerleading (fall and winter), cross country, field hockey, football, golf, lacrosse (girls and boys), soccer (girls and boys), softball, track (fall and spring), swimming, and wrestling. The club offerings include: Belvidere Babble, Chess Club, Class Officers, Drama Club/Tech Team, Environmental Club, Extended Learners, Future Educators of USA, FFA, GSA, Leo Club, Math Club, Math Honor Roll, Music Choir/Band, National Honor Society, SADD, SAFE, Seater Scoop, Ski Club, Spanish National Honor Society, Student Government, and Yearbook.

A comparison of extracurricular offerings at several high schools in the region shows that Belvidere HS students have more opportunities per student than their peers. Belvidere HS students are also taking advantage of these opportunities at an impressive rate. In the 2023-24 school year, total participation in these activities by Belvidere HS students was 998 for an average of 3.2 activities per student.

TABLE 80
Extracurricular Activities Offered at Selected Area High Schools, 2023-24⁸⁷

	Belvidere	Hackettstown	Newton	Phillipsburg	Warren Tech
Student Enrollment	312	889	721	1,799	406
Athletic Programs	20	21	22	20	10
Student Clubs	21	33	37	55	11
Student to Activity Ratio	7.6	16.2	12.2	24.0	19.3

Hope offers seven clubs – Chess Club, Gifted & Talented, Homework Club, Panther Pride Honor Society, Stem Club, Student Government, and Yearbook – with participation by approximately 110 students.

White offers six clubs – Archery, Chess, Drama, Jumpstart, Video, and Woodshop.

Great Meadows offers nine clubs – Little Jags Club K-3 / Cooperation Club 4-8 (SEL), Homework Club K-8, Garden Club K-3, Lunch Bunch 5-8, Restorative Group 5-8, Archery Club 4-8, Volleyball 5-8, Drama Club 4-8, Students Achieve More in Summer (SAMS) K-8 – with participation in at least one activity by 86 students at Central ES and by 175 students at Great Meadows MS (4-8).

None of the pK-8 schools in this study offer athletic opportunities to their students, which is not uncommon for smaller elementary schools due to enrollment and finances. Athletics are available to elementary students at the community recreation level and through regional travel teams, though many require family financial and logistical support. One of the benefits of a combined middle school for grades 6-8 would be the possibility of offering interscholastic athletic programs to middle school students for competition against peers in the county and beyond.

Aligning clubs and activities across schools has the potential to create common experiences upon which students can draw, particularly in the areas of athletics and the arts, where skill development is essential for success. Even well-aligned pK-8 programs would benefit the students as they approach their high school years.

19. School and District Staffing

Parents and members of the local community will likely be concerned about the impact of staffing decisions on their children’s education. Class sizes, subject and course offerings, and the ability of the instructional staff to meet the needs of individual students will be top of mind in discussions surrounding staffing at each of the schools. While specific enrollment projections are an important

⁸⁷ Belvidere HS data from the student information system; other area high schools were selected for comparison based on proximity to Belvidere and availability of extracurricular program data on their websites

metric when it comes to scheduling the actual number of sections of classes and hiring certificated staff to teach those sections, another way to examine instructional staff needs is through looking at student-to-teacher ratios across the districts.

In a regionalized district, the board of education would work with district and building-level administrators to determine staffing needs at each grade level (elementary level - kindergarten to grade 5) and within each subject area (secondary level - grades 6 through 12). Staff members may be moved between grade levels or across schools, within their areas of certification, to best meet the needs of the students they serve. These intra-district transfers and reassignments have the potential, over time, to lead to increased staffing efficiencies.

The superintendents provided thoughts on regional sharing already underway and expressed interest in further collaborations. There is the beginning of sharing elementary specials teachers such as an art teacher (40% Belvidere / 60% Harmony) and Spanish teacher (60% Harmony / 40% White). Interest was expressed by several in sharing a head custodian, potentially turning into a director of facilities. Great Meadows noted that its new supervisor of buildings and grounds is excellent and they would be willing to discuss interest in shared service for this position.

School Level Staffing⁸⁸

Belvidere

Belvidere currently employs 69 certified staff members (46% with masters' degrees), who have demonstrated expertise in all core content areas required under the state's curricular standards as well as guidance, health, special education, and administration. There are 22 subject matter teachers at Belvidere HS. Belvidere is led by a shared superintendent, each school is led by a principal, and the high school employs an assistant principal (note: an administrative restructure occurred in the Fall of 2024 and is addressed further on in this section). Staffing is as follows:

Belvidere ES

- 3 preschool teachers
- 1 kindergarten teacher
- 1 first grade teacher
- 1 second grade teacher
- 1 third grade teacher
- .5 fourth grade teacher
- 2 fourth/fifth grade teachers
- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth grade English teacher
- 1.5 sixth/seventh/eighth grade Math teachers
- .5 RTI Math teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth grade Science teacher

⁸⁸ Each of the following staff lists come from the districts either through the position control roster or a separately created document

- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth grade Social Studies teacher
- 1 Spanish teacher
- 1 Music teacher
- .4 Art teacher (shared with Harmony)
- 1 Health & Physical Education teacher
- .5 electives teacher
- 6.5 special education teachers (K-12)
- 4 resource room teachers (K-12)
- 6 child study team members (pK-12)
- 1 media specialist (K-12)
- 1 guidance counselor
- 1 school nurse
- 1 principal

Belvidere HS

- 3 Math teachers
- 3 English teachers
- 3 Science teachers
- 4 Social Studies teachers
- 2.5 Health & Physical Education teachers
- 2 Spanish teachers
- 1 Music teacher
- 1 Art teacher
- 1 Math/BSI teacher
- 1 RTI Math teacher
- 1 RTI Reading teacher
- 1 Family and Consumer Science teacher
- 1 Agriculture teacher
- 1 guidance counselor
- 1 school nurse
- 1 assistant principal
- 1 principal

District

- .6 superintendent (shared with Harmony)
- .6 business administrator (shared with Harmony)
- .4 special services director (shared with White, Hope, and Harmony)

Harmony

Harmony serves students in grades pK-8 in one school building, and students in grades 9-12 attend Belvidere HS unless they choose other options. The district has 34 certificated staff members with almost 60% of them having masters' degrees. Harmony is led by a principal and shared superintendent. Staffing is as follows:

- 1 pK teacher
- 1 kindergarten teacher
- 1 first grade teacher
- 1 second grade teacher
- 1 third grade teacher
- 1 fourth grade teacher
- 1 fifth grade teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth grade ELA teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth grade Math teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth grade Science teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth Social Studies teacher
- 1 second grade resource teacher
- 1 third grade resource teacher
- 1 fourth grade resource teacher
- 1 fifth grade resource teacher
- 3 sixth/seventh/eighth grade resource teachers
- 3 first to eighth grade resource teachers
- .6 Spanish teacher (shared with White)
- 1 Music teacher
- .6 Art teacher (shared with Belvidere)
- 1 Health & Physical Education teacher
- 1 computer lab teacher
- 1 media specialist
- 1 RTI Math teacher
- 1 RTI Reading teacher
- 1 school nurse
- 1 guidance counselor
- 1 principal
- .2 special services director (shared with White, Hope, and Belvidere)
- .4 business administrator (shared with Belvidere)
- .4 superintendent (shared with Belvidere)

Hope

Hope serves students in preschool through grade 8 and, as described above in this report, has one school. Students attend Belvidere HS for grades 9 to 12 unless they choose other options. The

district has 25 certificated staff members, one-third of whom have masters' degrees. Hope is led by a school principal and an interim superintendent, though the administrative structure may change once a permanent administrator is found. Staffing is as follows:

- 1 pK teacher
- 1 kindergarten teacher
- 1 first grade teacher
- 1 second grade teacher
- 1 third grade teacher
- 1 fourth grade teacher
- 1 fifth grade teacher
- 1 middle school ELA teacher
- 1 middle school Mathematics teacher
- 1 middle school Science/STEAM teacher
- .5 History/Civics teacher
- .4 Spanish teacher
- .6 Music teacher
- .4 Art teacher
- .75 Health & Physical Education teacher
- 1 media center teacher
- 3 special education teachers
- 1 RTI teacher
- 2 resource room teachers
- 1 school nurse
- 1 guidance counselor
- 1 principal
- .2 special services director (shared with White, Harmony, and Belvidere)
- .4 business administrator (shared with White)
- .2 superintendent (interim role)

White

White serves students in grades pK-8 in one school building, and students in grades 9-12 attend Belvidere HS unless they choose other options. The district has 34 certificated staff members with 65% of them having masters' degrees. White is led by a chief school administrator, who serves as superintendent and principal. Staffing is as follows:

- 1 pK teacher
- 2 kindergarten teachers
- 2 first grade teachers
- 2 second grade teachers
- 2 third grade teachers
- 2 fourth grade teachers

- 1 fifth grade Science teacher
- 1 fifth/sixth grade ELA teacher
- 1 fifth grade Mathematics/resource teacher
- 1 fifth/sixth grade Social Studies/resource teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh grade Math teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh grade ELA teacher
- 1 seventh/eighth Social Studies teacher
- 1 seventh/eighth grade ELA teacher
- 1 seventh/eighth grade Math teacher
- 1 sixth/seventh/eighth grade Science teacher
- .4 Spanish teacher (shared with Harmony)
- 2 Music teachers
- 1 Art teacher
- 1 Technology teacher
- 1 Health & Physical Education teacher
- 1 media specialist
- 1 special education teacher
- 1 basic skills teacher
- 3 resource room teachers
- 1 school nurse
- 1 guidance counselor
- .2 special services director (shared with Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere)
- .6 business administrator (shared with Hope)
- 1 chief school administrator

Great Meadows

Great Meadows serves students in grades preK to 8. Students in pK-3 attend Central ES and those in grades 4-8 attend Great Meadows MS. The district has 65 certificated staff members, with more than 50% having masters' degrees. The district is led by a superintendent and the schools each have a principal. Staffing is as follows:

Central ES

- 2 preschool teachers
- 3 kindergarten teachers
- 3 first grade teachers
- 2 second grade teachers
- 4 third grade teachers
- 2 resource teachers
- 1 RTI teacher
- 2 special education teachers for LLD, ASD
- 1 Media/Technology teacher

- 1 Art teacher
- 1 Music teacher
- 1 Health & Physical Education teacher
- 1 school nurse
- 1 guidance counselor (shared with Great Meadows MS)
- 1 school counselor (shared with Great Meadows MS)
- 1 GATE teacher (shared with Great Meadows MS)
- 1 world language teacher (shared with Great Meadows MS)
- 1 social worker (shared with Great Meadows MS)
- 1 school psychologist (shared with Great Meadows MS)
- 1 speech teacher (shared with Great Meadows MS)
- 1 principal

Great Meadows MS

- 2 fourth grade teachers
- 1 fourth grade in class support teacher
- 1 fifth grade Math teacher
- 1 sixth grade ELA teacher
- 1 sixth grade Math teacher
- 1 fifth-sixth grade Science teacher
- 1 fifth/sixth Social Studies teacher
- 1 seventh grade ELA teacher
- 1 seventh/eighth grade Math teacher
- 1 seventh/eighth grade Science teacher
- 1 seventh/eighth grade Social Studies teacher
- 1 eighth grade ELA teacher
- 1 Music teacher
- 1 Art teacher
- 2 Health & Physical Education teachers
- 1 media specialist/BSI
- 1 Technology teacher
- 3 resource room teachers plus 1 sixth grade special education teacher
- 1 school nurse
- 2 guidance counselors
- 3 special education teachers for MD, LLD, ERI
- 1 learning disabilities teacher consultant
- 1 world language teacher (shared with Central ES)
- 2 speech teachers (1 shared with Central ES)
- 1 school counselor (shared with Central ES)
- 1 school psychologist (shared with Central ES)
- 1 school social worker (shared with Central ES)

- 1 ESL teacher (shared with Central ES)
- 1 GATE teacher (shared with Central ES)
- 1 principal

District

- 1 superintendent
- 1 business administrator

Staffing Ratios, Salaries, Experience, and Retention

Tables 81 and 82 look at student to staff ratios and staff salaries. As a grades pK-12 district, Belvidere is separated from the others, which are grades pK-8. This allows for the comparison between different peer groups. Belvidere’s data is compared to 51 NJ peer school districts, which are all K-12 districts with less than 1,800 students. White, Hope, and Harmony are compared to their peers, which number 79 small K-8 school districts across the state.

It is not easy to draw definitive conclusions here without being explicit about what one values. For example, each of the districts has a lower student to teacher ratio than the midpoint of its peers and the state median. This is a good thing in that it creates potential opportunities for more personalized attention, which has been correlated with higher student achievement. It could also be construed as a somewhat inefficient use of human and fiscal resources that could be reallocated to address other needs.

TABLE 81
Student to Staff Ratios and Staff Salaries, Belvidere, 2021-22⁸⁹

	Belvidere	Peer Rank	State Median
Ratio of Students to Classroom Teachers	9.5	42 51	11.4
Median Classroom Teacher Salary	\$77,856	28 51	\$79,293
Ratio of Students to Support Personnel	35.5	50 51	66.0
Median Support Personnel Salary	\$79,043	28 51	\$84,732
Ratio of Students to Administrators	100.7	42 51	140.8
Median Administrator Salary	\$132,327	26 51	\$137,932
Ratio of Faculty to Administrators	13.4	19 51	14.8

⁸⁹ NJDOE Taxpayers Guide to Education Spending, 2023 (2021-22 data); ranks are among the 51 K-12 NJ school districts with less than 1800 students, highest to lowest for ratios and lowest to highest for salaries

TABLE 82
Student to Staff Ratios and Staff Salaries, Harmony, Hope, and White, 2021-22⁹⁰

	Harmony	Peer Rank	Hope	Peer Rank	White	Peer Rank	State Median
Ratio of Students to Classroom Teachers	6.4	72/79	7.0	67/79	8.6	43/79	9.7
Median Classroom Teacher Salary	\$71,897	55/79	\$66,733	34/79	\$75,351	61/79	\$73,300
Ratio of Students to Support Personnel	62.3	44/79	131.0	6/79	89.7	17/79	62.7
Median Support Personnel Salary	\$68,797	46/79	\$64,548	28/79	\$68,797	46/79	\$75,700
Ratio of Students to Administrators	187.0	6/79	65.5	62/79	269.0	2/79	115.9
Median Administrator Salary	\$110,000	30/79	\$133,500	68/79	\$153,775	78/79	\$131,374
Ratio of Faculty to Administrators	32.0	3/79	9.9	55/79	34.4	1/79	14.1

As for staff salaries, one’s view of the amounts and ranks is also dependent upon value judgments as well as comparison groups. In Belvidere, the salaries in each of the three categories are below state medians but around the midpoint of the peer districts. This is because the state medians are based on all K-12 school districts (whether small, medium or large), whereas the peers are just the small K-12s. Having lower salaries than medium or large K-12s is perhaps to be expected, however it does not help the district in competing with others for personnel talent.

Looking at K-8 school district salaries, there is considerable variety among White, Hope, and Harmony as compared to its peers and the state median. In the case of administrative salaries, this may be the result of counting differences as noted above. Teacher salaries make up the majority of personnel costs, and the differences here will need to be considered should the districts pursue regionalization. There will be more examination of the specifics of the current collective bargaining agreements in the Finance and Operations domain.

⁹⁰ NJDOE Taxpayers Guide to Education Spending, 2023 (2021-22 data); ranks are among the 79 K-8 NJ school districts with less than 400 students, highest to lowest for ratios and lowest to highest for salaries

TABLE 83
Student to Staff Ratios and Staff Salaries, Great Meadows, 2021-22⁹¹

	Great Meadows	Peer Rank	State Median
Ratio of Students to Classroom Teachers	12.1	4 63	11.3
Median Classroom Teacher Salary	\$71,665	37 63	\$78,200
Ratio of Students to Support Personnel	74.5	14 63	74.9
Median Support Personnel Salary	\$74,235	40 63	\$81,633
Ratio of Students to Administrators	168.7	5 63	135.2
Median Administrator Salary	\$125,512	36 63	\$128,614
Ratio of Faculty to Administrators	16.2	17 63	12.3

The ratio of students and faculty to administrators is one that draws attention often, though this particular data presents a confusing picture. We question the data when comparing ranks of 62 and 55 in these two respective categories at Hope with ranks of 2 and 1 respectively in White. Both have had similar administrative structures: a chief school administrator (who serves as superintendent and principal); a shared business administrator; no assistant superintendent or assistant principal; and a shared director of special services (also shared with Belvidere and Harmony). To have such disparate rankings given this similarity suggests the data were not counted in the same manner.

⁹¹ NJDOE Taxpayers Guide to Education Spending, 2023 (2021-22 data); ranks are among the 63 K-8 NJ school districts with between 401 and 750 students, highest to lowest for ratios and lowest to highest for salaries

TABLE 84
Staff Experience and Retention, 2022-23⁹²

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows	State Average
Average teacher years of experience in public schools	16.5	14.6	14.9	16.3	15.8	12.5
Average teacher years of experience in district	13.6	10.9	12.1	14.1	13.4	11.3
Percentage of teachers with 4+ years in district	79.7%	93.1%	83.3%	84.8%	74.8%	74.8%
One year retention of teachers	92.2%	93.3%	90%	93.8%	85.0%	88.4%
Percentage of teachers out-of-field	0.0%	10.3%	19.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.4%
Average administrator years of experience in public schools	20.0	23.0	n/a	18.0	20.0	16.1
Average administrator years of experience in district	9.0	1.0	3.0	5.0	7.0	12.5
Percentage of administrators with 4+ years in district	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	50.0%	77.9%
One year retention of administrators	100.0%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	75.0%	86.6%

Table 84 displays data on the experience and retention of the teaching and administrative staff. It is important to have experience and stability among staff members to provide students with a sense of continuity and belonging. The average teaching experience in all five districts exceeds that of the state average by anywhere from two to four years. The teaching staff is stable in these districts too, as the percentage with four or more years on staff is anywhere from five to eighteen percent above the state average. Similarly, the average administrator experience is from two to seven years longer than the state average. However, stability is uneven as Great Meadows, Belvidere and White have long-serving district leaders, while Harmony’s principal enters a second year in the role and Hope’s chief school administrator recently left the district.

Teachers working outside their field of certification has emerged as a statewide concern as demand for certified and non-certified personnel continues to outweigh supply. It is not surprising to find the

⁹² NJDOE School Performance Report, 2022-23

issue impacting Hope and Harmony especially, as both have fewer than three dozen staff members and one or two working outside their certification could shift this data greatly.

District Level Staffing

Table 85 compares the district administrative staffing in each of the districts, and there are multiple shared positions. Belvidere and Harmony share a business administrator as do Hope and White. Great Meadows’ superintendent also serves as the director of special services. The Belvidere Cluster’s four districts all share one special services director. White and Hope shared a superintendent seven years ago, and White’s district leader is now a chief school administrator who serves as principal and superintendent. Presently, Hope’s superintendent is serving in a part-time interim role. A part-time K-8 curriculum coordinator is not listed here but is shared among the Belvidere Cluster districts.

TABLE 85
District Administrative Staffing, 2023-2024

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Superintendent ⁹³	0.6	0.4	0.2	1	1
Business Administrator ⁹⁴	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.6	1
Instructional Supervisors ⁹⁵	0	0	0	0	0
Child Study Team Director	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	0
Technology Director	1	0	0	0	1
Custodial Supervisor ⁹⁶	2	1	1	1	1
Transportation Coordinator	0	0	0	0	0

There has been a recent administrative restructure in Belvidere following the resignation of the high school assistant principal/athletic director. The superintendent has added the role of principal for grades pK-5, the former elementary principal is now responsible for grades 6-12 and athletics, the former high school principal is now the director of guidance and academics, and the district employs one of its teachers as a part-time dean of students for grades 9-12.

⁹³ White stipends a lead teacher for when the CSA is not on site

⁹⁴ Harmony pays Belvidere for business services, including those of the business administrator

⁹⁵ Belvidere stipends some teachers as instructional coordinators at the high school

⁹⁶ Belvidere also employs an operations director, overseeing custodial and maintenance personnel

Projected Staffing Needs

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option

Projecting staffing needs for consolidated districts is based on a great deal of context and requires setting some parameters. The objective should be to provide equal or improved educational services to students through optimized staffing and operations wherever possible.

This study considers it a given that all existing schools will remain open and operate with most school-level positions remaining as they presently do if there is a district regionalization. Each school is expected to retain its administrative and teaching staff as well as other essential support positions such as nurses, counselors, library media specialists, and teaching assistants. In the case where the school district uses a chief school administrator model, indicating a combined superintendent/principal, the assumption is the current chief school administrator will remain employed as a principal. It would take largely the same staff to perform the other support functions in each school as well.

There are no contingency plans considered here for staff changes based on the enrollment projections presented earlier in this study. However, as years pass following any regionalization, it will be important for district- and school-level administrators to pay close attention to staffing needs in each school as opportunities for efficiencies may present themselves. These considerations would want to mirror best practices in school staffing and operations.

There is already sharing going on with cluster CST staff, though this is an area where some related services providers are outsourced currently. Sharing CST members and related services providers does not necessarily mean the staff member becomes disconnected from the current school, but it does provide opportunities for the schools in the cluster to gain both continuity and efficiency.

With school-level staff remaining relatively constant, the opportunities for efficiency will be more available by combining some positions on district office staffs, though there is a great deal of role sharing happening already. A single unified district would need only one superintendent and one business administrator, while assistant superintendent and assistant business administrator positions may need to be considered in the new structure. One could project a slight reduction from 2.2 current superintendent positions⁹⁷ to one plus an assistant superintendent with possible responsibilities for curriculum coordination (currently one shared part-time person) and instructional supervision (currently no staff) among other things. The Belvidere superintendent taking on the role of pK-5 principal at this time would need to be factored in.

There are currently two shared business administrators in the Belvidere Cluster and one in Great Meadows. It would be reasonable to think that there would be a reduction in one position given there are 3 current positions (2 shared between two districts) and a need for one business administrator and likely an assistant business administrator with partial responsibility to coordinate transportation to address that office's needs. The special services director role could be expanded to

⁹⁷ White's district leader is a chief school administrator, whose role in a regionalized district would shift to school principal

include the Great Meadows schools, which presently do not have a dedicated director with the superintendent performing that function. Other administrative roles leading technology and facilities could be combined into a single leader in each area. Clerical staff in each department could also present opportunities for restructuring in a unified pK-12 district, though those were not deeply investigated in this study.

Currently, there are administrative tasks replicated in five school districts that could be completed once. From the state monitoring system to district audits to routine report filings and countless other tasks, these responsibilities are done five times each time a deadline for said report or data upload is completed. This replication costs both time and money and drains resources from other productive uses. The reduction of this overlap would almost certainly result in staffing efficiencies and the ability to save money or redirect funding back to educational programming.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option

The creation of a combined middle school program in the Belvidere Cluster would be a school level change versus a district reorganization. In this scenario, school level staffing would likely undergo some consolidation due to scheduling efficiencies, though many of the middle level teachers would be employed in a new location. It is difficult to project administrative staffing until a site is selected. Multiple superintendents have shared roles or additional responsibilities that would need to be considered. As a middle school program in an existing school that already has a principal, it is not a given that these grade levels would get their own principal or even their own administrator. However, achieving the benefits of a combined program will need focused leadership that may require additional personnel capacity, especially if the site is Belvidere HS/ES in light of the recent administrative restructuring there. There is a more in-depth look at a potential middle school model in the Cost Savings section under the Finance and Operations domain.

Grades pK-8's with Closing Belvidere HS Option

This option would create the need to look closely at its impact on Belvidere HS staff, which would be speculative and beyond the scope of this study. Seniority and tenure rules would apply, potentially leading to some of the current high school staff being employed at Belvidere ES. A full analysis of the potential for near future retirements could help achieve staff reductions partly through attrition. While this option would reduce the number of employees required, it may not have a significant impact financially, as tuition dollars currently received by Belvidere from Harmony, Hope, and White would need to be redirected to other high school districts. Belvidere would also need to fund new tuition dollars for its own high school students to attend school elsewhere.

20. Educational and Programmatic Impact

The data collection and analysis throughout this domain of the study makes it evident that the boards of education, school and district leaders, teachers, and other staff members in all the school

communities in Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows care deeply about the success of the students under their responsibilities.

From curriculum development and implementation to staffing and supervision and more, we were unable to identify any area where a full grades pK-12 regionalization or a combined grades 6-8 (or 7-8) middle school program would be detrimental to the students or to their success. In fact, the study comes to the conclusion that a consolidation of the districts and/or programs can only lead to additional educational opportunities for all students in a more effective and efficient manner.

At the start of this Education and Program domain, the following question was presented that would be addressed through data collection and analysis: *Will the creation of an all purpose regional school district, a send-receive middle school program, or the closing of Belvidere HS produce educational benefits or challenges for staff and students, including traditionally underserved populations, when compared to the status quo?*

The team of consultants believes that grades pK-12 students in a new regionalized district or grades 6-8 (or 7-8) students in a combined middle school program would receive greater access to a higher quality, more equitable education than they currently receive. The closing of Belvidere HS is a more complicated scenario and does not yield confidence in terms of enhanced educational benefits for students or staff members.

The study of high performing schools is both substantial and complex with varied findings. While each study includes nuances, most include the following common characteristics:⁹⁸

1. A clear and shared focus;
2. High standards and expectations for all students;
3. Effective school leadership;
4. High levels of collaboration and communication;
5. Curriculum, instruction and assessments aligned with state standards;
6. Frequent monitoring of learning and teaching;
7. Focused professional development;
8. Supportive learning environment; and
9. High level of family and community involvement.

We believe that all of the characteristics listed above are found at some level in each of the current districts. Given the differences in programming leading into high school, an all purpose regional school district serving the students of Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows or a combined middle school program in the Belvidere Cluster should be able to identify and provide better alignment in meeting each of these characteristics, ultimately resulting in even stronger educational programs for students.

⁹⁸ The Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools, The Danielson Group

Academics

The consolidation of programs leading to the start of high school would ensure that all students have a similar foundation in reading, writing, math, and other content areas. Better aligned teaching strategies, instructional content, and time spent on each academic area can help mitigate discrepancies in literacy levels and mathematics skills among students entering middle and high school, creating a higher platform for academic success.

Currently, only Great Meadows and Belvidere take advantage of the state's preschool expansion funding, a significant resource being used by school districts throughout the state. White, Hope, and Harmony each offer half-day, tuition-based, preschool programs as choices for their families. While eligible, some have insufficient space to accommodate preschool expansion. Working as one all purpose regional school district, the staff could research available space within the confines of the larger region and potentially expand its preschool offerings.

In the area of instructional programs, each district uses a variety of resources and strategies in teaching ELA, Math, and other content areas. These strategies include universal screening, high-quality content complemented by effective teaching and learning strategies, and interventions for both the struggling student and the high achiever. When implemented consistently throughout the region, each of these strategies can lead to a more equitable allocation of resources in both time and material for students who need the greatest levels of support.

There would be opportunities for teachers to build upon the skills and knowledge gained from the aligned programs in a more informed manner, limiting the time spent re-teaching or addressing gaps in understanding. Teachers can align their curricula more effectively, knowing that students have been exposed to similar instructional materials and teaching methods in elementary and middle school. Finally, a better aligned system of schools leads to a supervisory structure that benefits new program implementation and new teacher induction. While mentoring and support are often associated with novice teachers, similar support benefits veteran teachers who are asked to implement new programs or instructional strategies.

Greater opportunities exist for authentic equity and inclusivity, made possible by reducing the unnecessary duplication of work across districts and redirecting resources toward ensuring that all students, regardless of background or prior educational experiences, have access to high-quality materials, instruction, and interventions. These steps help mitigate disparities in educational achievement and empower all students to succeed academically. As the districts experience the expiration of the federal funding that was made available during and immediately after the pandemic, the continuation of much needed academic support services may be at risk, punctuating the need to streamline these services. Furthermore, comparative data on standardized test results can be used to inform education policy decisions and resource allocation within an expanded district.

Given the proximity of the districts involved in this study, the shared goal of advancing achievement for all students, and the common high school that serves the Belvidere Cluster, there is much to be gained from better coordinating the student experiences at the pK-8 levels, whether through

regionalization of the districts or the expansion of shared services. While regionalization and shared services have the potential to produce similar benefits, it is important to understand that shared services come with additional challenges. Working with and between multiple boards and central offices, those staff members participating in shared services are often stretched thin and are more inclined to look elsewhere for opportunities to serve just one board and one superintendent.

Some of the benefits noted above can also be realized by the Belvidere Cluster through combining grades 6-8 (or 7-8) into a single middle school program. This is especially true if the program were located in Belvidere HS/ES, as it would provide a more seamless educational program from grades 6 through 12. Middle school student and teacher access to core high school facilities such as a gymnasium, auditorium, library, and technology labs present the opportunity for more rapid growth in skill development given more age appropriate spaces.

Extracurriculars

When examining extracurricular opportunities, it is obvious that each district understands the importance of providing students with in-school and after-school activities that broaden their experiences and build the social emotional learning competencies outlined in the framework from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. This organization has served as a leader in the global social emotional learning movement and a trusted voice in this rapidly growing field. All of the pK-8 schools and Belvidere HS offer multiple extracurricular opportunities in the form of clubs and the arts for students to grow physically, socially, and emotionally. A robust interscholastic athletics program is offered at Belvidere HS, and would become an area of new opportunity for middle school grade students in a regionalized pK-12 district or combined middle school program.

Supporting Special Populations

Each of the school districts involved in this study has students with special needs placed in out-of-district settings. Each of these placements is restrictive and costly in terms of tuition and transportation, and they provide opportunities for the school districts to realize efficiencies while educating these students in-district in less restrictive environments.

This is an area where regionalization or increased shared services between districts could reap significant benefits. Building programs from the earliest of ages to meet the needs of these students and others with similar needs has the potential to benefit the students, their classmates, and the communities by enhancing inclusivity throughout the region. Launching and maintaining such programs requires a certain number of students, which would prove more achievable in an all purpose regional district or in a region where child study team members and related services staff operated as a single department of special services. An added benefit of initiating these programs in-house is the opportunity to attract tuition students to the region, possibly offsetting local costs.

The population of English language learners in each district is relatively small, ranging from zero to 3.5% of the student population. Numbers this low can make it difficult to establish a comprehensive

program to address the needs of these learners. By pooling resources across an all purpose regional district or sharing staff and consistent programming across the districts, planning for this important subset of the student population becomes more impactful and efficient. As our state and nation continue to grow more diverse, well-researched and funded programs also position the district to meet the needs of the multilingual learner population for years to come.

Students identified as exceptionally gifted make up a small percentage of the student body in almost all school districts. The coordination of programming for students so identified can help better meet the needs of this talented group of young people by pooling resources, including staffing, to provide exemplary programs that align well on a K-12 continuum. Giftedness comes in many forms and aligning programs across an expanded regional district offers the opportunity to better target programs to the gifts of the young people included in the program while preparing students for the opportunities that await them in the future.

Professional Learning and Sustainable Leadership

Through the adoption of school-based professional learning communities led by a single office of curriculum and instruction, there would be expanded opportunities for collaboration between educators to identify best practices and data-driven interventions that lead to sustained improvement. Educators can learn from each other and implement strategies that have been successful in other classrooms to enhance teaching and learning.

Opportunities for improved academic planning and preparation between schools would also be enhanced. By comparing the performance of their school to that of other schools within the district with similar student bodies, educators would be able to identify trends, strengths, and areas for improvement, allowing for targeted interventions to support struggling readers and challenge advanced learners.

Improved collaboration and communication across schools within a single district fosters better communication between elementary and high school teachers as a shared vocabulary emerges. High school educators can more accurately gauge students' abilities and instructional needs based on their prior experiences with the shared program. Both of these outcomes can be achieved through regionalization of the districts or expanded levels of shared services through a central office of curriculum and instruction.

As noted previously, while the use of shared services is one means of controlling financial obligations within a school district, these sharing arrangements do not come without cost. The toll on human capital can be dramatic as shared leaders and staff are frequently faced with increased obligations from accountability measures to public meeting requirements to the frequency of school and community responsibilities. These issues and others bring the sustainability of these shared services arrangements into question. Regionalization allows district leadership and staff to focus more of their time and attention on school improvement and efficiency efforts and less on repetitive compliance-driven tasks.

FINANCE and OPERATIONS

21. State Aid & Local Tax Levies

This domain of the study examines the financial implications of the regionalization of Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows. As described in the Consolidation Options section in the Introduction, the scenarios being considered in this study are:

- Consolidating all school districts into one all-purpose, regional school district for students in grades pK-12 both with and without Great Meadows;
- Revising existing send-receive agreements, or developing new ones, to send all grades 6-8 students to a combined middle school program;
- Closing Belvidere HS, reorganizing Belvidere into a pK-8 school district, and having each pK-8 district create a new send-receive relationship with another Warren County high school district for students in grades 9-12; and
- Maintaining the status quo with opportunities to better align educational programs and support services while reducing or controlling the costs of educating students in each district through the expansion of shared services and other efficiencies.

For purposes of this financial analysis, only the regionalization scenarios both with and without Great Meadows require analysis of state aid or tax apportionment for several reasons. First, state aid is not impacted by the reorganization of the middle school program nor the closing of Belvidere HS. In both circumstances, state aid would continue to be provided for all K-12 resident students of each separate school district and varying tuition payments would be exchanged between districts in the cluster. Since none of the districts in either case would be joining a regional district as a constituent member, there will be no impact in how state aid for each district will be calculated.

Second, tax apportionment is not necessary unless a regional school district is created. While there may be tax levy implications to both the reorganization of the middle school program and the closing of Belvidere HS, neither scenario requires a change in how the tax to be levied in each community is calculated. The taxes levied in either scenario will depend on the costs to operate the middle school program or which district each in the Belvidere Cluster sends students to for high school, the tuition rates, potential savings generated in each sending district stemming from the closing of each's middle school program or the closure of Belvidere HS, and balancing the costs of operating the remaining elementary/middle schools while paying tuition under a send-receive agreement.

For these reasons, the tables and narrative in the sections that follow, will only refer to the regionalization scenarios with and without Great Meadows.

The primary finance methodology was to analyze all internal and public financial data to draw conclusions on efficiency, determined solely by the aggregate amount of savings for the all purpose,

grades pK-12, regional school district when compared to the status quo. This narrative will rely heavily on the reader to review and draw conclusions from the financial tables that follow.

Key Assumptions

General Assumptions

- It is the view of the consultants that voters in the municipalities of Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, Independence, and Liberty would be motivated to approve a question where there exists the possibility for tax savings or only minimal tax increases relative to the status quo that are offset by important benefits to educational programs.
- The tax levies and rates projected in the analysis are for the purposes of studying the differences between the status quo and the regionalization scenario and are not intended to serve as predictions of future tax levies and rates.
- Estimates of participating district enrollment in school years 2026 through 2029 were used in the determination of state aid and in the allocation of both equalized valuations and tax levies. The enrollment predictions rely on the conclusions produced by this study's demographer and on other projection methods when demographer projections were unavailable. To some extent, demographic projections rely on data submitted by the participating school districts.
- Because Great Meadows has constituent municipalities as an existing regional district, the status quo scenario continues to allocate tax levy responsibility for pK-8 Great Meadows based solely on the enrollments of each constituent municipality.
- Where a starting date is required, a newly created regional district would begin operation on July 1, 2026.

Financial Assumptions

- Future tax levies will reflect the maximum two percent annual increase, and no banked cap will be utilized to increase levies beyond the two percent.
- NJ would continue to provide state aid pursuant to the School Funding Reform Act of 2008 (SFRA), as modified by what is widely known as Senate Bill 2 (S2). FY 2025 is the last year of the scheduled phase-in to full funding of the SFRA formula. It is anticipated that state aid will continue to be fully funded in annual appropriations acts throughout the studied period extending to FY 2029.
- The provisions of P.L.2021, c.402 (alternatively referred to herein as S3488), which modify how state aid is calculated for a regional school district created or expanded following the completion of a feasibility study funded with an SREP grant, would apply to each participating district and to any newly created regional school district.

- Debt service aid for the newly created regional school district would be an aggregate of the constituent district debt service aid.
- The equalized value of real property in each community would continue in a manner consistent with secular trends present between FY 1999 to FY 2025. The trend patterns reflect cyclical increasing, peaking, and declining equalized valuation trends over a 15-17 year cycle.
- State aid benefits provided pursuant to P.L.2021, c.402's slower phase-out schedule will not count towards the state aid for the budget year in which it is applicable and are considered by the consultants to be a bonus appropriation due to how recently the law was changed and the lack of official guidance on the new rules.

Operational Assumptions

- Existing shared services agreements between the constituent members of the participating districts would terminate upon consolidation.
- Transportation issues in the regionalization scenarios, including distance between schools and communities, routes, and projected costs would not be altered when the grade configurations of the constituent districts remain as they are currently.
- The operating budget for the newly created regional school district would be an aggregate of the constituent district budgets less the cost savings outlined later in this study.
- Any cost reductions to the budget, including personnel outlined in this study, would be approved by the board of education of the newly created regional school district.

Asset/Liability Assumptions

- Existing assets among the districts would become the shared assets of the newly created regional school district.
- Existing debt among the districts would become the shared debt of the newly created regional school district.
- Costs related to school building conditions, including educational adequacy, planned expansions, and maintenance would be assumed by the newly created, all-purpose regional school district, and therefore, do not impact this analysis.

Legal Assumptions

- P.L.2021, c.402 provides a specific transition mechanism when a regional district is formed that allows for existing employee contracts to continue until their expiration, or, for up to three years following regionalization, whichever occurs first, at which point the salary guide and terms/conditions of the largest constituent district's agreement would apply until a

successor agreement is negotiated. This examination of state aid and tax apportionment did not make any assumptions on the value of any potential new collective bargaining agreements.

- P.L.2021, c.402 states that newly created regional school districts shall, “... receive State school aid in an amount that is the greater of: (a) the amount of State school aid that the newly created regional school district would receive as a regional school district; or (b) the sum of the amount of State school aid received by each school district constituting the newly created regional school district prior to the creation of such regional school district.”⁹⁹ State aid analysis in this study follows the consultants' interpretation that this statutory language establishes the pre-regionalization sum of state aid as a fixed baseline for comparison. This means using the actual aid amounts received by the constituent districts immediately prior to regionalization, rather than calculating what these districts might have hypothetically received in future years had they remained separate entities.
- According to multiple state government sources, the legislative intent of the language cited above was that state aid should be calculated not just *prior to* the creation of the regional school district, *but in each subsequent year*, such that the new regional district would continue to receive the greater of the regional combined amount or the sum of the separate district amounts. Consultants have requested an interpretation from the Department of Education that would clarify and confirm the original legislative intent. Consultants have also engaged with leaders of the State Legislature to propose amendments to the current language to clarify and confirm that intent, and extend that method of calculation through the 2033-2034 school year. In that case, the aid calculations in this study would represent a conservative estimate of the potential state aid impacts of regionalization.

State Aid Calculations & Methodology

Prior to the 2024-25 school year and since its enactment and implementation in the 2008-09 school year, the SFRA formula for K-12 education was never fully funded in any annual state budget. The persistent underfunding eventually led to significant updates known as the S2 legislation enacted in 2018. S2 provided a six-year phase-in schedule in order to achieve full funding of the SFRA formula by the 2024-25 school year. At the time of writing, state aid figures for the 2024-25 school year have been distributed to school districts and the 2024-25 school year is underway. While state aid figures have been inherently unpredictable in the past, it is expected that in each year going forward under the current full funding paradigm, a district's state aid will equal the equalization aid and categorical aid amounts determined by the SFRA formula.

Therefore, for the purpose of estimating state aid in both the status quo and regionalization scenarios outlined above, the consultants implemented a model approximating the SFRA funding formula. State aid estimates for future years are based on the enrollment, demographic, property value, and aggregate income trends in each participating school district and municipality.

⁹⁹ N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-68(4c)

Historical trends were analyzed and used to estimate future values of both equalized valuations for each municipality and aggregate income in each participating district. Enrollments used in the model have been estimated by the study's demographer utilizing a cohort-survival methodology, wherever possible. Where required, other projection methods were also utilized and explained in various sub-calculations within the model.

The model first determines each participating district's adequacy budget, local fair share, and the resulting equalization aid. Three other aid categories – special education categorical aid, security categorical aid, and transportation categorical aid – are calculated and added to the equalization aid to determine a district's total state aid, also called uncapped aid. Additionally, school choice aid is included in the total where relevant.

As part of the changes enacted under S2, a check is performed each year after the SFRA formula amounts are determined. Current year formula amounts are compared to the amount of state aid received by the district in the prior year. This comparison is called the state aid differential. A positive differential means that the district received more aid in the prior year than the formula would provide in the current year while a negative differential means that a district's prior year state aid was less than is needed for the current year.

Districts with positive state aid differentials have prior year funding reduced to match the current year formula amount and districts with negative state aid differentials have funding increased to match current year formula amounts. State aid differentials are significant to this financial impact analysis because S3488 provides a means for school districts participating in an SREP grant who have a positive state aid differential to preserve state aid that would otherwise be removed each year prior to regionalization.

The model calculates state aid differentials pursuant to the formula defined in S2 to determine eligibility for any state aid benefit a district may qualify for under S3488. This process is performed for each participating district in the status quo scenario and, where applicable, for the consolidated all-purpose regional school district in that scenario. All estimated S3488 benefits are summarized later in this subsection.

The figures generated from running the model represent a comprehensive estimate of state aid for fiscal years 2026 through 2029 that reflect the expectations of both the study's financial and demographic experts and that are informed by the most up-to-date data.

Tax Levy Apportionment Calculations and Methodology

School taxes to be levied in the newly created, all purpose, regional school district must be estimated and a portion of the overall responsibility must be assigned to each individual constituent municipality. To determine the impact of regionalization on tax levies in each participating community, the amounts owed by each constituent are compared to the amounts that each constituent would pay in the status quo scenario.

A constituent’s share of the tax responsibility depends on the apportionment method used by the regional school district. Under current law, regional school districts may use either the equalized property values in each community or the actual count of students attending the regional school district from each community. In either case, a community’s share is the proportion of its property values or enrollment relative to the total property value or enrollment in the regional school district. The law also allows for a combination of both apportionment methods to be used where each method is weighted by a multiplier between zero and one hundred percent. For example, equalized valuations could be given a 75% weighting and enrollment 25%. Using whole percentages, this analysis results in one hundred and one apportionment scenarios ranging from equalized valuations weighted at 100% and enrollment weighted at 0% to equalized valuations weighted at 0% and enrollments weighted at 100%. The outputs for all scenarios have been analyzed to identify a range of apportionment ratios that provide the most benefit to the municipalities that would constitute the newly created regional school district.

State Aid History

Tables 86 through 90 present the state aid received by each participating school district for the 2020 through 2025 school years. Data provided for 2025 are official figures for the 2024-25 school year released in February 2024 by the NJDOE.

TABLE 86
State Aid K-12, Belvidere, FY 2020-25

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Equalization Aid	2,581,559	2,601,124	2,639,457	2,302,610	2,162,872	2,296,541
Transportation Aid	14,798	14,798	14,798	14,798	14,798	14,798
Special Education Aid	295,639	295,639	295,639	295,639	295,639	352,075
Security Aid	58,460	58,460	58,460	58,460	58,460	61,165
Adjustment Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
School Choice Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total State Aid	2,950,456	2,970,021	3,008,354	2,671,507	2,531,769	2,724,579
Prior Year State Aid	2,918,370	2,950,456	2,970,021	3,008,354	2,671,507	2,531,769
YoY Difference (\$)	32,086	19,565	38,333	-336,847	-139,738	192,810
YoY Difference (%)	1.10%	0.66%	1.29%	-11.20%	-5.23%	7.62%

Examining the six year period from 2020 to 2025, Belvidere has experienced mostly consistent state aid in all years of the S2 period with average state aid in the most recent three years (2023-2025) running roughly 13% lower than aid in 2020-2022, \$2.64 million versus \$2.98 million. Total state aid received by Belvidere is currently \$2.7 million in 2025.

The stable trend was a result of the S2 phase-in methodology and how annual increases or decreases in aid were calculated. In 2020, at the beginning of the S2 methodology, Belvidere’s state aid was already very close to its formula aid amount. Each successive year, a similar dynamic was present

and Belvidere gained or lost only small amounts of aid each year through 2025, at which point Belvidere’s formula aid and state aid became equal.

While not shown in the table above, it should be noted that Belvidere did receive an appropriation of supplemental stabilization aid for the 2023-24 school year in the amount of \$92,227 pursuant to legislation adopted in April of 2023, which softened the reduction in aid experienced in that year.¹⁰⁰

TABLE 87
State Aid K-12, Harmony, FY 2020-25

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Equalization Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
Transportation Aid	146,873	146,873	146,873	146,873	146,873	146,873
Special Education Aid	233,650	235,642	230,814	215,192	214,223	242,991
Security Aid	31,434	31,434	31,434	31,434	31,434	31,434
Adjustment Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
School Choice Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total State Aid	411,957	413,949	409,121	393,499	392,530	421,298
Prior Year State Aid	407,195	411,957	413,949	409,121	393,499	392,530
YoY Difference (\$)	4,762	1,992	-4,828	-15,622	-969	28,768
YoY Difference (%)	1.17%	0.48%	-1.17%	-3.82%	-0.25%	7.33%

Harmony did not receive any equalization aid throughout the S2 period. The SFRA formula as modified by S2 allocates equalization aid to districts which are determined unable to raise sufficient funds locally. In the eyes of the state’s funding formula, Harmony is more than able to raise sufficient funds and therefore the state only provides categorical aid proportional to Harmony’s enrollment. In 2025, Harmony’s total state aid was \$421,000, though it also received a small appropriation of supplemental stabilization aid of \$640 in 2023-24.

Hope’s total state aid declined annually throughout the S2 period, as Hope was considered to be overaided by the state’s funding formula and the S2 methodology worked to phase out the excess aid through 2025. The declining trend resulted in a 2025 total state aid of \$346,000. Hope received \$52,533 in supplemental stabilization aid in 2023-24, recovering two-thirds of its state aid reduction in that year. Additionally, legislation passed in May of 2024 renewing the stabilization aid grant program to restore a portion of state aid reductions.¹⁰¹ Hope was eligible to receive a \$1,357 stabilization grant for the 2024-25 school year.

¹⁰⁰ P.L.2023, c.32; amounts are not shown in the tables

¹⁰¹ P.L.2024, c.13

TABLE 88
State Aid K-12, Hope, FY 2020-25

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Equalization Aid	601,436	472,135	314,349	174,664	95,068	92,053
Transportation Aid	63,460	63,460	63,460	63,460	63,460	63,460
Special Education Aid	167,533	167,533	167,533	167,533	167,533	167,533
Security Aid	22,505	22,505	22,505	22,505	22,505	22,505
Adjustment Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
School Choice Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total State Aid	854,934	725,633	567,847	428,162	348,566	345,551
Prior Year State Aid	937,619	854,934	725,633	567,847	428,162	348,566
YoY Difference (\$)	-82,685	-129,301	-157,786	-139,685	-79,596	-3,015
YoY Difference (%)	-8.82%	-15.12%	-21.74%	-24.60%	-18.59%	-0.86%

TABLE 89
State Aid K-12, White, FY 2020-25

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Equalization Aid	581,054	581,054	380,289	123,963	0	0
Transportation Aid	249,609	249,609	249,609	249,609	249,609	249,609
Special Education Aid	335,067	335,067	335,067	335,067	323,623	274,851
Security Aid	49,562	49,562	49,562	49,562	49,562	49,562
Adjustment Aid	300,512	85,489	0	0	0	0
School Choice Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total State Aid	1,515,804	1,300,781	1,014,527	758,201	622,794	574,022
Prior Year State Aid	1,654,954	1,515,804	1,300,781	1,014,527	758,201	622,794
YoY Difference (\$)	-139,150	-215,023	-286,254	-256,326	-135,407	-48,772
YoY Difference (%)	-8.41%	-14.19%	-22.01%	-25.27%	-17.86%	-7.83%

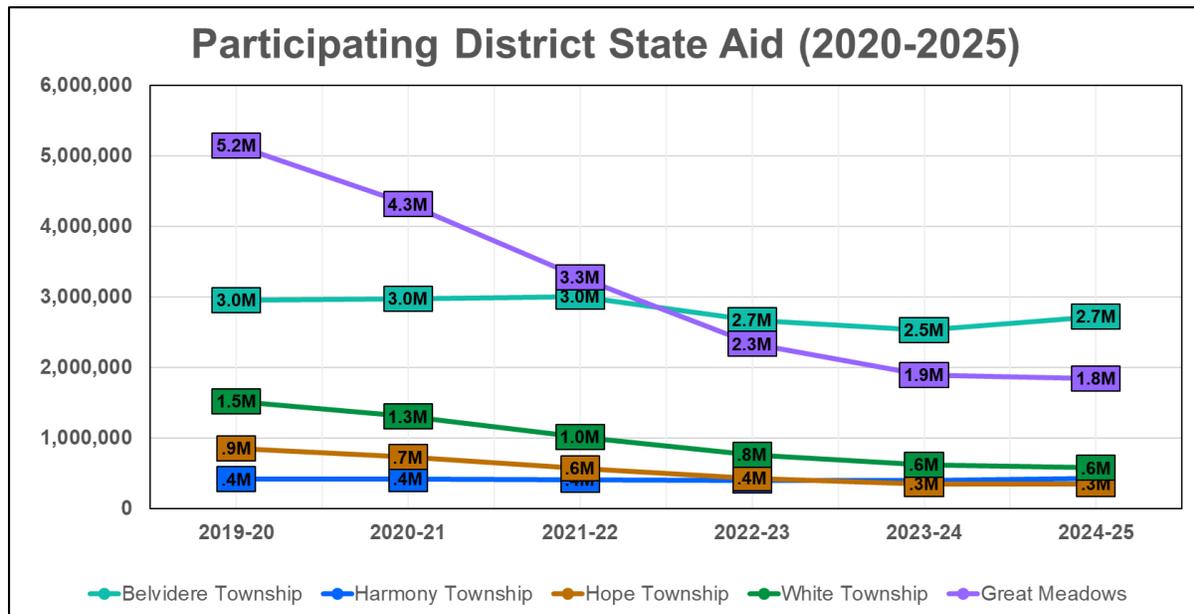
White has also seen a declining state aid trend annually from 2020 to 2025, as it is considered overaided in the eyes of the state’s funding formula. The excess aid was phased out completely by fiscal year 2023 and no equalization aid was provided in 2024 or 2025. Currently, White receives categorical aid proportional to enrollment, and underlying property and income wealth dynamics suggest that White will not be eligible for equalization aid for some time. Total 2025 state aid was \$574,000. The district also received \$89,369 in state aid 2023-24 through supplemental stabilization aid, recovering two-thirds of its state aid reduction in that year. White was also eligible to receive a \$21,947 stabilization grant for the 2024-25 school year.

TABLE 90
State Aid K-12, Great Meadows, FY 2020-25¹⁰²

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Equalization Aid	4,134,864	3,297,471	2,262,332	1,316,796	873,160	827,524
Transportation Aid	147,093	147,093	147,093	147,093	147,093	147,093
Special Education Aid	763,471	763,471	763,471	763,471	763,471	763,471
Security Aid	105,232	105,232	105,232	105,232	105,232	105,232
Adjustment Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
School Choice Aid	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total State Aid	5,150,660	4,313,267	3,278,128	2,332,592	1,888,956	1,843,320
Prior Year State Aid	5,688,726	5,150,660	4,313,267	3,278,128	2,332,592	1,888,956
YoY Difference (\$)	-538,066	-837,393	-1,035,139	-945,536	-443,636	-45,636
YoY Difference (%)	-9.46%	-16.26%	-24.00%	-28.84%	-19.02%	-2.42%

Great Meadows has seen substantially reduced aid from 2020 to 2025 with aid reductions totaling \$3.3 million and aid falling from \$5.2 million in 2020 to \$1.8 million in 2025. As was the case with Hope and White, Great Meadows was considered overaided by the state’s funding formula and excess aid was phased out over the period. The district received supplemental stabilization aid in 2023-24 in the amount of \$292,800. Additionally, Great Meadows was eligible to receive a \$20,536 stabilization grant for the 2024-25 school year.

CHART 10
State Aid in the Participating School Districts, FY 2020-25



¹⁰² Despite its organization as a K-8 unit, Great Meadows receives state aid for students in grades K-12 and makes tuition payments to Hackettstown for students in grades 9-12.

The participating districts show divergent state aid trajectories from 2020-2025. While Belvidere maintained relatively stable aid with moderate fluctuations, Harmony saw minimal changes due to its lack of equalization aid. In contrast, Hope, White, and Great Meadows experienced substantial declines as S2 eliminated their excess aid. Great Meadows saw the largest reduction, losing \$3.3 million over the period. By 2025, with SFRA fully funded, the districts receive a combined \$5.9 million in state aid, down from \$10.9 million in 2020.

With S2's phase-in complete and SFRA fully funded, future state aid will follow different patterns than the historical trends described above. The following subsection examines projected aid through 2029 under status quo operations.

State Aid Projections for the Status Quo

This subsection presents the model's estimated state aid for each participating district from 2026 through 2029 if they continue operating as separate districts. The analysis focuses on the SFRA formula aid categories of equalization aid, special education categorical aid, security categorical aid, and transportation categorical aid. In addition, school choice aid has been projected for each district based on historical trends, where applicable. Adjustment aid has been removed as it phases out completely beginning in 2026 pursuant to S2.

The 2024-25 school year marks the first year in which the state has fully funded the SFRA formula amounts in the annual state budget. In this new paradigm, a district's state aid in each future year will be the amount determined by the SFRA funding formula. This differs significantly from how state aid was determined from 2020 to 2025. Under the old method, instead of receiving the full amount of aid determined by the SFRA formula, a district would receive or lose a pro-rata share of the difference between the pre-budget year aid and budget year formula aid. The exact pro-rata share followed a phase in schedule outlined in S2. This left many school districts statewide with either more or less state aid than called for under the state's funding formula. Now that the phase-in is complete, the SFRA formula will determine how state aid is allocated to each school district.

This analysis uses a comprehensive model built on extensive research and detailed data. The model incorporates key factors including property values, community wealth, enrollment trends, and other state funding parameters to provide meaningful forecasts of each district's state aid and potential regionalization outcomes. While the projections are based on thorough analysis and reasonable assumptions, future outcomes will naturally vary as circumstances change. The model's strength lies in its ability to compare scenarios and understand relative impacts, even if specific numbers evolve over time. It provides a solid foundation for informed decision-making while acknowledging that, like any forward-looking analysis, adjustments may be needed as conditions change.

Tables 91 through 95 summarize the projections for status quo state aid in the same format as the historical tables presented above. Under the status quo, each district remains separate and continues to operate its schools as it does currently.¹⁰³

TABLE 91
Projected State Aid K-12, Belvidere, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Equalization Aid	2,003,775	1,949,958	1,731,714	1,702,938
Transportation Aid	4,076	3,756	3,541	3,507
Special Education Aid	352,357	334,298	327,081	325,679
Security Aid	68,777	63,385	59,760	59,177
Total State Aid	2,428,985	2,351,397	2,122,097	2,091,300
Prior Year State Aid	2,724,579	2,428,985	2,351,397	2,122,097
YoY Difference (\$)	-295,594	-77,588	-229,300	-30,796
YoY Difference (%)	-10.85%	-3.19%	-9.75%	-1.45%

In the status quo scenario, Belvidere’s state aid is projected to decline throughout the studied period, driven largely by decreases in projected enrollment through 2029. The declining trend is expected to bring Belvidere’s aid to \$2.1 million in 2029 from its current 2024-25 level of \$2.7 million.

TABLE 92
Projected State Aid K-12, Harmony, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Equalization Aid	0	0	0	0
Transportation Aid	118,878	124,644	128,733	144,605
Special Education Aid	256,927	281,115	295,930	341,566
Security Aid	25,552	26,791	27,670	31,081
Total State Aid	401,357	432,549	452,333	517,252
Prior Year State Aid	421,298	401,357	432,549	452,333
YoY Difference (\$)	-19,941	31,193	19,784	64,918
YoY Difference (%)	-4.73%	7.77%	4.57%	14.35%

From 2026-29, Harmony is projected to experience an increase in its categorical aid allocations driven by projected enrollment increases and inflationary impacts on underlying SFRA parameters. Harmony is not projected to see any change in its equalization aid allocation, as its local fair share amount under the funding formula exceeds its adequacy budget.

¹⁰³ Tables 91-95 and Chart 11 display the status quo projections to be compared to the regional calculations that follow them. These may be subject to administrative interpretations of legislative intent and potential legislative amendments to P.L. 2021, c.402 that would provide a true “hold harmless” situation as discussed previously under the subheading “Legal Assumptions.”

TABLE 93
Projected State Aid K-12, Hope, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Equalization Aid	0	391,383	654,762	1,288,319
Transportation Aid	119,030	134,289	135,630	148,208
Special Education Aid	227,564	265,919	280,355	309,792
Security Aid	22,487	25,370	25,623	27,999
Total State Aid	369,080	816,961	1,096,370	1,774,318
Prior Year State Aid	345,551	369,080	816,961	1,096,370
YoY Difference (\$)	23,529	447,881	279,409	677,948
YoY Difference (%)	6.81%	121.35%	34.20%	61.84%

State aid to Hope increases from 2025 to 2029 due primarily to projected enrollment increases which increase the district’s adequacy budget. Over the same period, local fair share is projected to decline slightly which results in increased equalization aid. The equalization aid increase reverses the district’s trend present under the S2 period from 2020-25 and is expected to result in a total 2029 state aid allocation of \$1.8 million.

TABLE 94
Projected State Aid K-12, White, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Equalization Aid	0	0	0	0
Transportation Aid	149,426	143,187	156,160	161,508
Special Education Aid	396,401	395,080	436,107	460,716
Security Aid	43,574	41,754	45,537	47,097
Total State Aid	589,401	580,021	637,805	669,321
Prior Year State Aid	574,022	589,401	580,021	637,805
YoY Difference (\$)	15,379	-9,381	57,784	31,517
YoY Difference (%)	2.68%	-1.59%	9.96%	4.94%

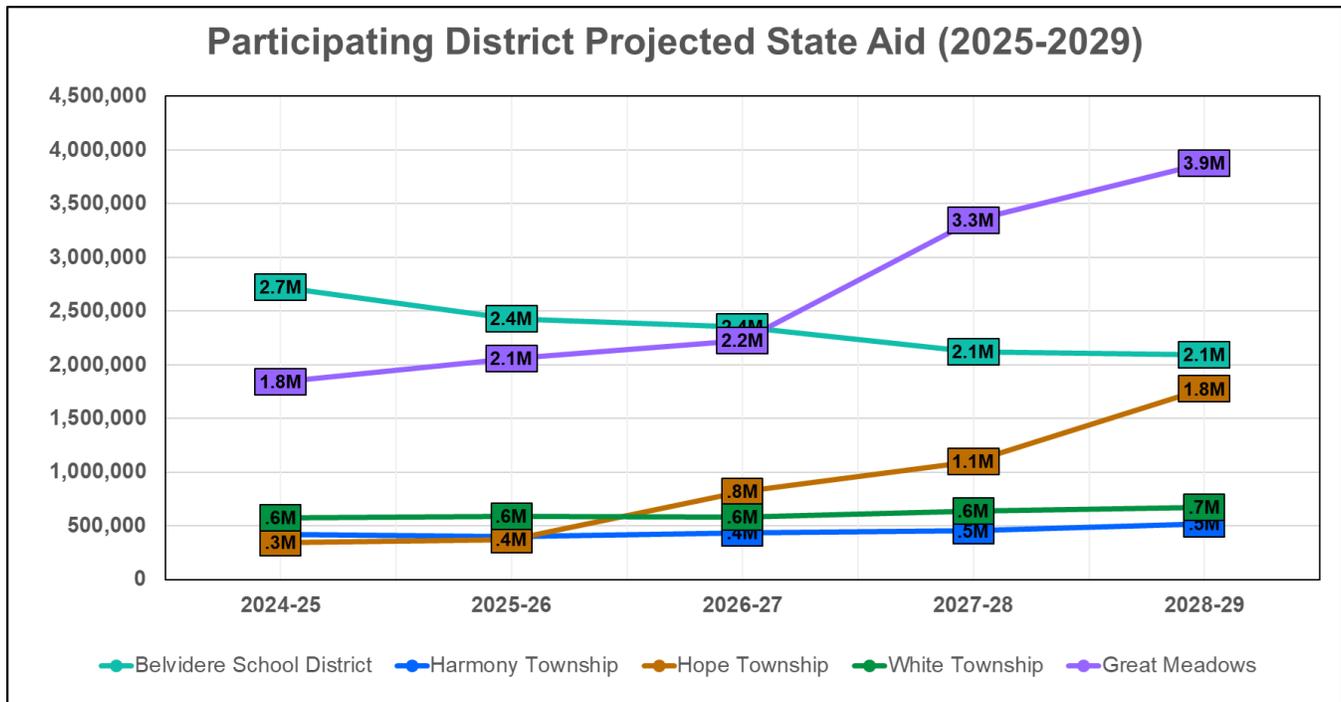
From 2026-29, White is projected to experience an increase in its categorical aid allocations driven by projected enrollment increases and inflationary impacts on underlying SFRA parameters. White is not projected to see any change in its equalization aid allocation as its local fair share amount under the funding formula exceeds its adequacy budget. However, while not changing enough for equalization to be provided, the relative levels of local fair share and adequacy underlying the funding formula are changing and, if those trends are continued into the future, they may result in an equalization aid allocation at some point.

TABLE 95
Projected State Aid K-12, Great Meadows, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Equalization Aid	128,551	287,861	1,309,922	1,817,934
Transportation Aid	727,352	718,574	741,891	745,042
Special Education Aid	1,086,433	1,109,262	1,175,932	1,199,451
Security Aid	112,139	110,786	114,381	114,866
Total State Aid	2,054,475	2,226,482	3,342,125	3,877,292
Prior Year State Aid	1,843,320	2,054,475	2,226,482	3,342,125
YoY Difference (\$)	211,155	172,008	1,115,643	535,167
YoY Difference (%)	11.46%	8.37%	50.11%	16.01%

As mentioned in the previous subsection, state aid to Great Meadows declined annually over the S2 period from 2020-2025. Looking forward, the model forecasts that this declining trend will reverse and, as projected enrollment increases, the district’s adequacy budget will rise sufficiently to produce an annually increasing allocation of equalization aid. The increase is substantial, with the aid growing from \$129,000 in 2026 to \$1.8 million by 2029. Total state aid is projected to rise to \$3.9 million from its current level of \$1.8 million.

CHART 11
Projected State Aid in the Participating School Districts, FY 2026-29



The 2026-29 projections show Great Meadows and Hope experiencing significant aid increases due to enrollment growth and adequacy budget changes. Meanwhile, Belvidere faces gradual declines while Harmony and White see modest categorical aid growth.

While individual district projections provide a baseline, regionalization would fundamentally change how state aid is calculated. The following analysis compares these standalone projections against two potential regional configurations.

State Aid Projections for an All-Purpose Regional School District

P.L.2021, c.402 updated several aspects of the law governing school district regionalization as it pertains to state aid. First, it created an alternative method of determining state aid for regional school districts who are participating in a feasibility study under a SREP grant. Under the consultants' current interpretation, which is under State review, the alternative method holds that the new regional school district's funding cannot fall below the sum of all constituent district state aid in the year *prior* to regionalization.¹⁰⁴

Second, it created an incentive for school districts participating in feasibility studies under an SREP grant by slowing any state aid reductions that may occur through FY 2029. In practical terms, the incentive allows districts to retain state aid that otherwise would have been removed.

Having already presented estimated state aid for each participating district in the prior subsection, this one presents the comparable state aid figures for a newly formed, all-purpose, regional school district using two distinct scenarios. First, for a regional school district consisting of the four districts in the Belvidere Cluster ("current cluster only"); and second, for a regional school district consisting of the Belvidere Cluster plus Great Meadows ("all potential constituents").

As a newly created regional, all student counts, demographics, property values, and aggregate personal incomes of the constituent districts shift into the regional for purposes of calculating state aid pursuant to the SFRA funding formula. The shifting of individual community property values, in particular, into the regional district impacts the proposed regional district's state aid in significant and interesting ways. These dynamics will be discussed in detail later in this subsection.

In the "all potential constituents" scenario in addition to the four communities comprising the current Belvidere Cluster, the townships of Independence and Liberty will also become constituent members of the newly created regional, and therefore, will also have their enrollments, property values, and incomes counted in the regional district.

The figures presented in the last subsection show that Belvidere, Hope, and Great Meadows are all projected to receive equalization aid through FY29 in varying amounts. Equalization aid is only provided to districts deemed unable to raise adequate local funds by the SFRA formula. To make this determination, a local fair share (LFS) amount is calculated which represents the amount

¹⁰⁴ Under the consultants' current interpretation based only on the year *prior* to regionalization, the results of the alternative method will be referred to from here forward as "locked aid". The requested administrative interpretation/legislative amendment will be noted as true "hold harmless aid".

anticipated by the formula that a district is able to raise locally through school taxes based on its actual property and income wealth factors.

If the LFS is higher than a district’s adequacy budget (i.e., the total dollar amount needed to educate children to proficiency), no equalization aid is provided. Likewise, if the LFS is lower than the district’s adequacy amount, equalization aid is provided in an amount sufficient to bring the district up to adequacy.

The reader may question how accurately the state’s LFS formula captures each district’s actual ability to levy taxes. This question has been the subject of much debate in recent years as property wealth, measured by aggregate equalized valuation within each community, has increased substantially and unpredictably in many districts leading to LFS amounts far higher than current taxes. When this occurs, districts receive less state aid but may not be able to offset losses with sufficient levy increases, either by choice or by defeated referendums.

The attention being paid to LFS in this analysis is justified as it greatly impacts the state aid calculation in either regional scenario. The tables that follow present how the property wealth in each district impacts the amount of equalization aid to be allocated to each separate district and as a regional.

TABLE 96
Projected Equalization Aid K-12, Belvidere, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Adequacy Budget	5,838,075	5,602,209	5,413,128	5,459,911
Local Fair Share	3,834,300	3,652,251	3,681,413	3,756,973
Equalization Aid	2,003,775	1,949,958	1,731,714	1,702,938

Belvidere is forecast to experience a stable LFS over the period at levels between \$3.6 million and \$3.8 million. Concurrently, its adequacy budget is projected to decline 6.5% from \$5.8 million to \$5.5 million. As shown in the table, these trends produce a continued allocation of equalization aid in Belvidere through 2029.

TABLE 97
Projected Equalization Aid K-12, Harmony, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Adequacy Budget	3,974,501	4,347,503	4,605,860	5,263,725
Local Fair Share	7,998,014	7,735,702	7,661,278	7,362,056
Equalization Aid	0	0	0	0

Harmony’s adequacy amount is projected to increase by 32% through 2029 due to projected enrollment growth and inflationary impacts on the SFRA funding formula. Despite this increase and

in contrast to Belvidere, Harmony’s LFS amount is significantly higher than the district’s calculated adequacy amount in each year which results in the state not providing any equalization aid, instead assuming Harmony is able to levy sufficient taxes to fund its entire adequacy amount.

TABLE 98
Projected Equalization Aid K-12, Hope, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Adequacy Budget	3,521,100	4,128,144	4,261,822	4,759,456
Local Fair Share	3,801,407	3,736,761	3,607,061	3,471,136
Equalization Aid	0	391,383	654,762	1,288,319

Hope’s adequacy amount is projected to increase by 35% from \$3.5 million to \$4.8 million by 2029. Over the same period, the LFS is projected to decline by \$330,000. A rising adequacy budget coupled with a declining local fair share will produce additional state aid in the future once the adequacy amount surpasses Hope LFS amount. This is projected to occur in 2027.

TABLE 99
Projected Equalization Aid K-12, White, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Adequacy Budget	6,164,919	6,132,261	6,841,066	7,207,226
Local Fair Share	9,257,437	9,453,187	9,483,623	9,495,406
Equalization Aid	0	0	0	0

White’s adequacy amount is projected to increase by 17% from \$6.2 million to \$7.2 million by 2029. Over the same period, the LFS is projected to increase marginally by around \$240,000. The dynamic of a rising adequacy budget coupled with a more slowly rising LFS will produce state equalization aid in the future once the adequacy amount surpasses White’s LFS amount. This is not projected to occur within the studied period. A longer-term analysis, inherently more speculative in nature, predicts that White’s adequacy amount will remain lower than its LFS through 2034.

TABLE 100
Projected Equalization Aid K-12, Great Meadows, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Adequacy Budget	16,828,599	17,256,385	18,257,350	18,683,286
Local Fair Share	16,700,048	16,968,524	16,947,428	16,865,352
Equalization Aid	128,551	287,861	1,309,922	1,817,934

Great Meadows is forecast to experience a stable LFS over the period at levels between \$16.7 million and \$16.9 million. Concurrently, its adequacy budget is projected to increase by nearly \$2

million. As shown in the table, these dynamics will produce a continued and increasing allocation of equalization aid each year in the studied period through 2029.

The tables above reiterate the trend patterns discussed earlier in this subsection while calling attention to the differences between each district's adequacy and LFS amounts. In a regional, whether with or without Great Meadows, the LFS amounts can be summed together and compared to the sum of all district adequacy budgets.¹⁰⁵ In doing so, however, individual district dynamics give way to the aggregate dynamics over all constituents. These dynamics in the aggregate will produce less state equalization aid than as separate districts.

To illustrate how property wealth aggregation affects aid, consider Belvidere and White separately for 2026. Belvidere's local fair share is \$3.8M against a \$5.8M adequacy budget, qualifying for \$2M in equalization aid. White's \$9.3M local fair share exceeds its \$6.2M adequacy budget, receiving no equalization aid. When combined, their \$13.1M total local fair share would exceed their \$12M combined adequacy budget, eliminating equalization aid entirely despite Belvidere's individual need.

Tables 101 and 102 compare total state aid when calculated using both methods, summing aid for each individual district in a given year compared to the aid that would be provided if calculated for a single regional district.

TABLE 101
Summary of Projected State Aid Status Quo vs. Regional, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Separate Districts	5,843,297	6,407,410	7,650,729	8,929,483
Regional District	-	3,778,208	3,954,332	4,724,868
Difference	-	-2,629,202	-3,696,398	-4,204,615

TABLE 102
Sum of Separate District Projected State Aid, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“Current Cluster Only” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Separate Districts	3,788,823	4,180,928	4,308,604	5,052,191
Regional District	-	1,839,587	1,922,128	2,060,934
Difference	-	-2,341,341	-2,386,476	-2,991,257

These projections demonstrate significant state aid differences between regional and separate district scenarios through 2029. In the “all potential constituents” scenario, operating as separate districts would yield \$4.2 million more in annual state aid by 2029. Similarly, the “current cluster only”

¹⁰⁵ Technically, SFRA methodology operates differently than described, but for simplicity the description here is a good approximation while being far less complex.

scenario shows nearly \$3 million more in annual state aid by 2029 if districts remain separate. However, as discussed earlier, recent changes to state law through S3488 provide important protections against these aid reductions, which are detailed below. But as we will see, the existing protections are not enough on their own to bring the regional district’s aid up to levels that match state aid allocations to the separate districts.

S3488 introduced a “locked aid” provision in law that secures the sum of state aid from all constituent districts in the year prior to regionalization if it is higher than the aid that would otherwise have been provided to the regional district; the exact scenario present in this cluster. The consultants’ current interpretation of this provision indicates that this clause will be triggered and the newly formed regional district, in either scenario, would receive the FY 2026 sum of constituent district aid each year through 2029, as presented. Applying the locked aid provision will revise the previous tables to the following.

TABLE 103
Summary of Projected State Aid Status Quo vs. Regional, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Separate Districts	5,843,297	6,407,410	7,650,729	8,929,483
Regional District	-	5,843,297	5,843,297	5,843,297
Difference	-	-564,113	-1,807,432	-3,086,186

TABLE 104
Sum of Separate District Projected State Aid, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“Current Cluster Only” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Separate Districts	3,788,823	4,180,928	4,308,604	5,052,191
Regional District	-	3,788,823	3,788,823	3,788,823
Difference	-	-392,105	-519,781	-1,263,368

Comparing the amounts in Tables 101 and 102 to those found in tables 103 and 104, respectively, we can see how the locked aid protection helps but does not completely offset the state aid differences in either regional scenario.

In the “all potential constituents” scenario, state aid in 2027 will be \$5.8 million. In the same year in the status quo as separate school districts, state aid will total \$6.4 million, a difference of \$564,000. In 2028, the gap widens to \$1.8 million in favor of a separate district configuration, and in 2029, the gap rises to \$3 million.

In the “current cluster only” scenario, a similar pattern is observed with differences of \$392,000, \$520,000, and \$1.3 million for 2027, 2028, and 2029, respectively, all in favor of a separate district configuration.

The next set of tables reveals the underlying local fair share and adequacy budget details that generate this outcome.

TABLE 105
All-Purpose Regional, Adequacy and Local Fair Share, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario

	2027	2028	2029
Adequacy Budget	37,481,039	39,482,845	41,482,224
Local Fair Share	41,716,916	41,496,799	40,877,649
Equalization Aid	0	0	604,576

TABLE 106
All-Purpose Regional, Adequacy and Local Fair Share, FY 2026-29
“Current Cluster Only” Scenario

	2027	2028	2029
Adequacy Budget	20,210,118	21,179,954	22,735,910
Local Fair Share	24,748,393	24,549,371	24,012,296
Equalization Aid	0	0	0

The calculated LFS in both regional scenarios is higher in nearly all cases than the calculated regional district’s adequacy budget. As discussed earlier, when this happens, the state does not allocate any equalization aid. Digging deeper, Belvidere, Hope, and Great Meadows will each be eligible for sizable state aid allocations each year through 2029 when constituted as separate districts, while Harmony and White will be ineligible under the formula. When the underlying equalized valuations and incomes are combined in the regional district, the higher LFS amounts in both Harmony and White offset the lower LFS amounts present in Belvidere, Hope, and Great Meadows. The result is that no equalization aid will be allocated in the “current cluster only” scenario and very little equalization aid will be allocated in the “all potential constituents” scenario.

Charts 12 and 13 below provide a visual illustration of the patterns discussed in this subsection.

CHART 12
 Projected State Aid Possibilities in an All-Purpose Regional District, FY 2026-29
 “All Potential Constituents” Scenario

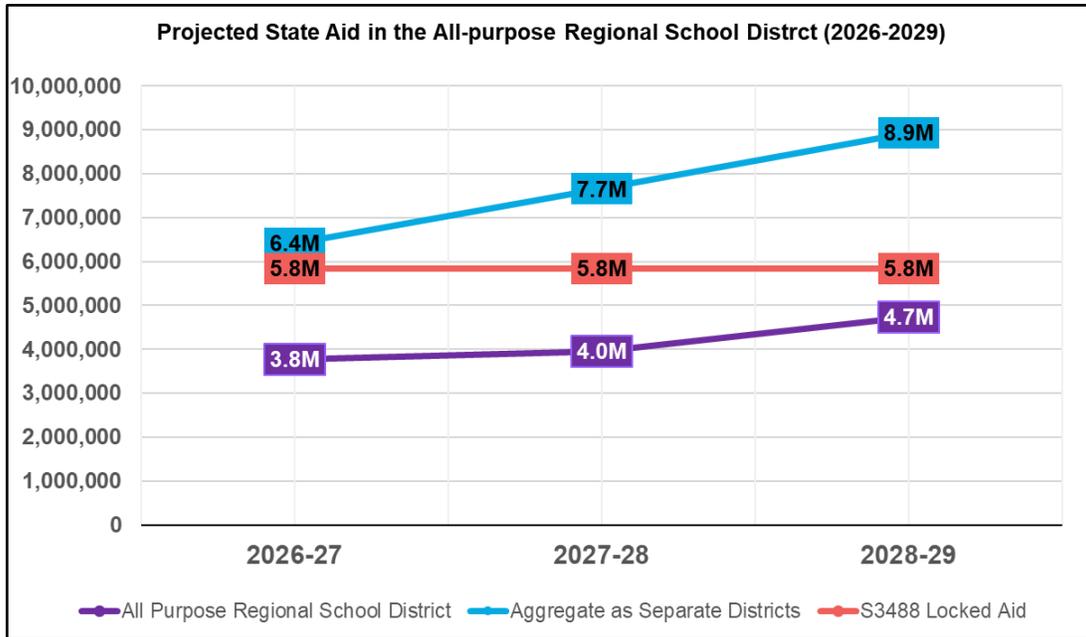
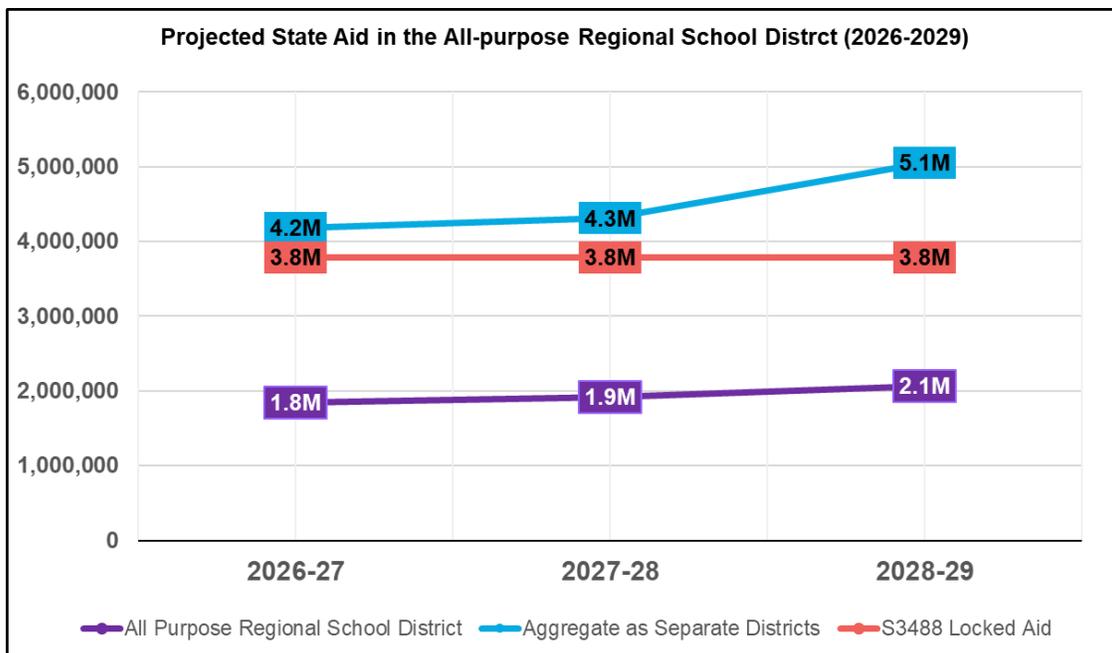


CHART 13
 Projected State Aid Possibilities in an All-Purpose, Regional District, FY 2026-29
 “Current Cluster Only” Scenario



These charts demonstrate the wide gap between separate district aid (blue) and regional aid (purple) through 2029. While S3488's locked aid provision (red) provides some protection, it cannot fully offset the aid reduction caused by combined property wealth calculations. This conundrum is why the consultants are seeking a NJDOE interpretation, or clarifying statutory language, to address this provision in a manner that would provide a true “hold harmless” situation that promotes the State’s demonstrated interest in school district regionalization.

Having described in detail the various factors and dynamics that impact the regional district’s state aid, a summary of the conclusions drawn from the above presentation of state aid is warranted.

1. Belvidere will continue to see substantial state aid through 2029, averaging nearly \$2.5 million annually.
2. Harmony will not receive an allocation of equalization aid over the period and will see slightly increasing total aid as inflationary pressures increase categorical aid categories.
3. Hope will see its decreasing aid trend halted and replaced with an increasing state aid trend through 2029. Total state aid is estimated to reach \$1.8 million by 2029.
4. White will not receive an allocation of equalization aid over the period and will see modest increases to categorical aid categories due to inflationary pressures.
5. Great Meadows will see the conclusion of its decreasing S2 state aid pattern and is estimated to experience annual state aid increases through 2029, as increases to the district’s adequacy budget outpace increases in local fair share.
6. State aid in the regional district configuration, with or without Great Meadows, benefits from recent changes to school regionalization law. The locked aid provision enacted by S3488 would bolster the regional school district’s state aid in both regional scenarios through 2029.
7. Despite the benefits provided by S3488, state aid is expected to be higher from 2026-29 if the participating school districts remain separately constituted. This is based on our consultants’ interpretation of the ambiguity in the current statutory language, which is believed by many to be contrary to the original legislative intent. A State administrative interpretation and revised legislation are being sought to ensure that school districts pursuing the benefits of regionalization would be held harmless in future state aid calculations.
8. A longer-term analysis reveals that by 2034, the regional school district’s financials may be such that regionalization might provide a state aid benefit without relying on a hold harmless provision. The longer term analysis is inherently less dependable than the analysis presented in this study through 2029.

In addition to the provisions and mechanisms already discussed, S3488 also offers districts who participate in regionalization studies an important protection against state aid losses. Normally, when a district’s state aid decreases from one year to the next, it receives the full reduction in aid.

However, under S3488, participating districts will see aid reductions softened through 2029. The law includes a schedule that gradually phases in any aid reductions, providing greater financial stability during the study period. This benefit is separate from and in addition to the main protections described above. The schedule and proration percentages in S3488 are as follows:

1. 30 percent in the 2021-2022 school year;
2. 37 percent in the 2022-2023 school year;
3. 46 percent in the 2023-2024 school year;
4. 55 percent in the 2024-2025 school year;
5. 65.5 percent in the 2025-2026 school year;
6. 76 percent in the 2026-2027 school year;
7. 88 percent in the 2027-2028 school year; and
8. 100 percent in the 2028-2029 school year.

It should be noted that to date, no district has yet been eligible for and received the state aid benefit described above. S3488 was enacted in early 2022, and the Department of Community Affairs only began awarding SREP grants in 2023. While prescriptive in the law, the benefits presented in this study rely on the interpretation of the financial experts conducting the analysis, as the NJDOE has yet to release guidance on how this provision in S3488 will be applied.

All efforts have been made to determine if any of the participating districts are eligible and to determine the amount of the benefit that would be applied, if the district was to make the election to receive the benefit pursuant to the law. To be eligible, a district: must be a participating district in an SREP grant; must have a positive state aid differential; and must be within two years of the SREP grant application approval date.

Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows are all participating districts under the current grant awarded in July of 2023. Therefore, criteria one and three are satisfied. To determine whether or not each district has a positive state aid differential and subsequently, the amount of the resulting benefit, actual state aid figures for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years were examined. The two school years would be, presumably, the two years the participating districts are eligible prior to an assumed regionalization occurring in 2026.

To illustrate how this might work in practice, consider a hypothetical district facing a \$250,000 state aid reduction in 2026-27. Under this protection, the district would only experience 76% of that reduction (\$163,750). Instead of losing \$250,000, the district would lose \$163,750, saving the district \$86,250 in that year. Districts receive this benefit annually during their study period, up to two years while working toward regionalization. If regionalization is successfully completed within

the two-year window, state aid in the new regional district would then be calculated as described previously in this subsection.

TABLE 107
State Aid Differentials, FY 2024 and 2025

		2024	2025
Belvidere	Uncapped Aid	2,487,639	2,724,581
	Prebudget Year Aid	2,671,507	2,531,769
	State Aid Differential	183,868	-192,812
	Differential Description	Positive	Negative
Harmony	Uncapped Aid	392,224	421,295
	Prebudget Year Aid	393,499	392,530
	State Aid Differential	1,276	-28,765
	Differential Description	Positive	Negative
Hope	Uncapped Aid	323,431	345,551
	Prebudget Year Aid	428,162	348,566
	State Aid Differential	104,732	3,015
	Differential Description	Positive	Positive
White	Uncapped Aid	580,035	574,022
	Prebudget Year Aid	758,201	622,794
	State Aid Differential	178,167	48,772
	Differential Description	Positive	Positive
Great Meadows	Uncapped Aid	1,748,860	1,843,320
	Prebudget Year Aid	2,332,592	1,888,956
	State Aid Differential	583,732	45,636
	Differential Description	Positive	Positive

Table 107 shows the state aid differentials for each of the participating districts for both the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years. All districts had positive state aid differentials in either 2024, 2025, or both years. All five districts would be eligible in 2024 and Hope, White, and Great Meadows would be eligible in 2025.

To calculate the amount of the potential state aid benefit, the differential is multiplied by the applicable percentage in the schedule outlined above. Table 108 summarizes the calculated potential state benefits.

TABLE 108
Calculated State Aid Benefit Due to S3488, FY 2024 and 2025

		2024	2025	Total
Belvidere	Differential	183,868	-192,812	
	S3488 Phase-out Percentage	46%	55%	
	Revised Reduction in Aid	84,579	0	
	Actual Reduction in Aid	139,740	0	
	Net Benefit	+55,160	0	55,160
Harmony	Differential	1,276	-28,765	
	S3488 Phase-out Percentage	46%	55%	
	Revised Reduction in Aid	587	0	
	Actual Reduction in Aid	969	0	
	Net Benefit	+383	0	383
Hope	Differential	104,732	3,015	
	S3488 Phase-out Percentage	46%	55%	
	Revised Reduction in Aid	48,176	1,658	
	Actual Reduction in Aid	79,596	3,015	
	Net Benefit	+31,419	+1,357	32,776
White	Differential	178,167	48,772	
	S3488 Phase-out Percentage	46%	55%	
	Revised Reduction in Aid	81,957	26,825	
	Actual Reduction in Aid	135,407	48,772	
	Net Benefit	+53,450	+21,947	75,397
Great Meadows	Differential	583,732	45,636	
	S3488 Phase-out Percentage	46%	55%	
	Revised Reduction in Aid	268,517	25,100	
	Actual Reduction in Aid	443,636	45,636	
	Net Benefit	+175,120	+20,536	195,656
Total Bel Cluster	Total Benefit	140,412	23,304	163,716
Total Bel & GM	Total Benefit	315,532	43,840	359,372

All districts stand to benefit from this S3488 mechanism with Belvidere, Hope, White, and Great Meadows being primary beneficiaries. Harmony would also be eligible but the total savings is less than \$500. In total, the current Belvidere Cluster districts stand to recover \$164,000 in aid for the 2024 and 2025 years, while the cluster including Great Meadows would receive \$359,000 in total benefits.

Several uncertainties exist regarding this new benefit. The aid represents a reduction in planned aid cuts rather than new funding – districts still lose aid year-over-year, just less than originally scheduled. The law requires districts to actively elect to receive this benefit, but provides no mechanism for doing so. Most significantly, it is unclear how this aid interacts with other SFRA calculations and S3488's "greater of" provision. This analysis treats the benefit as a bonus appropriation separate from regular aid calculations.

The state aid analysis reveals significant financial challenges to regionalization under current funding formulas. While S3488's protections provide some mitigation, the aid reduction from combined property wealth calculations creates a substantial hurdle. However, state aid represents only part of the financial picture. The following subsection examines how tax levies would be apportioned in a regional configuration.

Tax Levy Apportionment

The purpose of this analysis is to: (1) evaluate the fiscal impact of regionalization on each municipality; (2) determine optimal tax apportionment methods that balance community interests; (3) assess the feasibility of achieving universal tax benefits across constituent districts; and (4) identify potential barriers to regionalization and possible mitigation strategies. This analysis is conducted in accordance with SREP guidelines, which require careful consideration of the tax impact on constituent municipalities as part of any regionalization effort.

In a regional school district, each constituent municipality is responsible for the financial support of the district. In order to determine each municipality's share of the district's total costs, an apportionment method must be chosen. Current law provides that taxes may be apportioned on the basis of: the portion of each municipality's equalized valuation allocated to the regional district; the number of students enrolled in the regional district from each municipality; or any combination of apportionment based on equalized valuations and enrollment.

The fairness of tax apportionment methods in regional school districts has long been debated in NJ. At its core, this debate pits equalized valuation methods, which benefit districts with lower property wealth, against enrollment-based approaches, which tend to favor wealthier areas. The former distributes costs based on a municipality's ability to pay, while the latter allocates expenses according to each district's usage of services. This tension between apportionment strategies has been a recurring theme in school district regionalization since the original regionalization law was adopted in 1931.

Equalized valuations (EVs) are assessments of property values used to ensure fair distribution of tax burdens and state aid across municipalities. These values aim to standardize property assessments, compensating for differences in local assessment practices and market conditions across the state. Using EVs rather than local assessed values, the state can more accurately compare the relative wealth of different communities. For example, if two identical houses are assessed at different values in different municipalities due to varying assessment practices, the equalization process adjusts these values to reflect their true market value, ensuring fair comparisons across district lines.

Historical and Projected Property Wealth

To analyze the potential impacts on the tax responsibilities of each community of creating an all-purpose regional district either with or without Great Meadows, the consultants utilized historical trends of EV, net valuation taxable (i.e., the total assessed value of all taxable property in a municipality), and other property value data spanning 25 years in order to estimate future EVs in each municipality.

In the status quo scenario, tax levies are assumed to increase by the maximum allowed 2% annually.

In the regionalization scenarios, total community projected EVs and projected enrollments are used to apportion the regional school district’s total costs, estimated to be the sum of projected constituent district tax levies net of any cost savings identified stemming from regionalization.

The tax levy represents the total amount of money a school district must raise through property taxes to support its annual budget after accounting for all other revenue sources.

Tables 109 and 110 contain the historical and current EVs for each municipality.¹⁰⁶ Data for each year represent the EVs used in state aid and tax apportionment calculations. For example, the EVs listed for 2025 are from the 2023-24 fiscal year.

TABLE 109
Historical Equalized Valuations, FY 2020-25

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Belvidere	184,221,085	191,071,124	187,326,662	209,983,788	235,502,877	232,850,805
Harmony	526,691,866	539,998,850	563,233,635	594,830,297	676,551,419	781,613,376
Hope	238,621,182	243,044,658	241,169,861	255,901,493	298,801,121	324,530,726
White	561,623,275	570,186,484	570,012,994	578,830,821	677,965,106	736,052,250
Independence	593,776,453	589,964,210	588,588,724	619,456,436	694,053,471	743,652,590
Liberty	286,108,573	296,199,270	297,023,292	316,920,052	342,962,209	387,908,523

TABLE 110
Projected Equalized Valuations, FY 2026-29

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Belvidere	272,001,612	273,285,195	268,828,146	244,972,038
Harmony	869,462,692	848,318,516	844,670,533	788,425,650
Hope	323,100,913	319,332,171	300,921,696	275,212,963
White	799,306,001	841,328,207	847,877,820	834,113,147
Independence	800,821,147	833,108,067	812,316,250	790,472,066
Liberty	421,407,713	443,560,556	458,477,128	438,715,075

¹⁰⁶ NJ Department of Community Affairs Tax Tables

After reaching highs in 2010, EVs in each constituent municipality bottomed around 2017, trended sideways through 2022, and have been rising steadily through the present. The future projections factor in longer-term secular trends informed by historical data dating back to 1999. Based on those trends, equalized values were forecast for 2026 through 2029. EVs are expected to rise in each municipality, peak at points over the next several years, and then begin to decline.

In Belvidere and Independence, the model predicts EVs will peak in 2027 and then begin declining. In Harmony and Hope, valuations peak in 2026. In White and Liberty, EVs peak in 2028.

Generally, the prediction model anticipates the upward trend observed over the last decade to come to a conclusion before 2029 and begin to reverse for some period of time. The model also analyzed broader statewide aggregate EVs and found consistent cyclical trends, lending consistency and validity to the individual predictions for each municipality.

Under the regionalization scenarios being studied, each community’s total municipal equalized valuation will be used for tax apportionment in the regional district. Additionally, in the “all potential constituents” scenario, both Independence and Liberty will become constituent districts and will have their equalized valuation added to the mix.

Table 111 presents how EVs will be split between the six municipalities in the “all potential constituents” regionalization scenario and Table 112 presents the same for the “current cluster only” scenario.

TABLE 111
Allocation of Equalized Value in an All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Belvidere	272,001,612	273,285,195	268,828,146	244,972,038
Harmony	869,462,692	848,318,516	844,670,533	788,425,650
Hope	323,100,913	319,332,171	300,921,696	275,212,963
White	799,306,001	841,328,207	847,877,820	834,113,147
Independence	800,821,147	833,108,067	812,316,250	790,472,066
Liberty	421,407,713	443,560,556	458,477,128	438,715,075
Total Equalized Valuation	3,486,100,077	3,558,932,711	3,533,091,573	3,371,910,939
Belvidere %	7.8%	7.7%	7.6%	7.3%
Harmony %	24.9%	23.8%	23.9%	23.4%
Hope %	9.3%	9.0%	8.5%	8.2%
White %	22.9%	23.6%	24.0%	24.7%
Independence %	23.0%	23.4%	23.0%	23.4%
Liberty %	12.1%	12.5%	13.0%	13.0%

Starting at \$3.49 billion in 2026, the total equalized valuation climbs to a high of \$3.56 billion in 2027, then declines over the next two years to settle at \$3.37 billion in 2029. Harmony represents the largest share at 24.9% in 2026, settling at 23.4% by 2029. White shows a steady upward trajectory, climbing from 22.9% to 24.7%, while Independence remains relatively stable around 23%. Liberty demonstrates modest but consistent growth from 12.1% to 13%, while both Hope and Belvidere show declining trends — Hope dropping from 9.3% to 8.2% and Belvidere decreasing from 7.8% to 7.3%.

TABLE 112
Allocation of Equalized Value in an All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“Current Cluster Only” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Belvidere	272,001,612	273,285,195	268,828,146	244,972,038
Harmony	869,462,692	848,318,516	844,670,533	788,425,650
Hope	323,100,913	319,332,171	300,921,696	275,212,963
White	799,306,001	841,328,207	847,877,820	834,113,147
Total Equalized Valuation	2,263,871,217	2,282,264,088	2,262,298,196	2,142,723,798
Belvidere %	12.0%	12.0%	11.9%	11.4%
Harmony %	38.4%	37.2%	37.3%	36.8%
Hope %	14.3%	14.0%	13.3%	12.8%
White %	35.3%	36.9%	37.5%	38.9%

Starting at \$2.26 billion in 2026, the total equalized valuation in this scenario shows slight growth to \$2.28 billion in 2027, before declining to \$2.14 billion by 2029. Looking at the individual communities, Harmony starts as the largest share at 38.4% but gradually decreases to 36.8% over the period. White shows consistent growth, increasing from 35.3% to become the largest share at 38.9% by 2029. Both Hope and Belvidere experience declining proportions — Hope dropping from 14.3% to 12.8% and Belvidere decreasing from 12.0% to 11.4%.

As mentioned, while equalized valuation represents one method for apportioning costs among constituent communities, state law also permits apportionment based on student enrollment figures. The following subsection examines the enrollment patterns across the district for the same time period, providing a comparison of how these two different apportionment methods would impact each municipality's share of the tax levy.

Historical and Projected Enrollment

State law requires regional districts to use average daily enrollment (ADE) for cost apportionment rather than point-in-time student counts. ADE represents the average number of students enrolled over the course of a school year, calculated by dividing the total number of days all students are

enrolled by the number of days school is in session. Further, given the timing of when the cost apportionment calculation is performed, pre-budget year enrollments are used. For instance, FY 2026 calculations are based on actual attendance patterns from the 2024-25 school year. The projections below reflect this methodology.

TABLE 113
Historical Average Daily Enrollment, FY 2020-25

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Belvidere	398	383	365	333	332	331
Harmony	318	310	281	263	252	251
Hope	194	176	174	180	184	186
White	394	394	355	359	368	347
Independence	638	607	606	600	611	604
Liberty	340	335	311	317	320	313
Total Enrollment	2,282	2,205	2,092	2,052	2,067	2,032

Total student enrollment across the entire group of six municipalities shows a general declining trend, from 2,282 students in 2020 to 2,032 students in 2025. Looking at the individual municipalities, Independence consistently maintains the highest enrollment, fluctuating between 638 and 604 students. White and Belvidere had similar enrollments in 2020 (394 and 398 respectively) and both experienced declines over the period with White at 347 students and Belvidere at 331 students. Liberty experiences a modest decline from 340 to 313 students, while Harmony shows the steepest decrease from 318 to 251 students. Hope’s enrollment initially declined from 2020 to 2022 but has since recovered about half of its decline and is currently at 186 students.

In the “all potential constituents” scenario, total enrollment shows a U-shaped trajectory, starting at 2,012 students in 2026, dipping to 1,992 in 2027, before rising steadily to reach 2,091 students by 2029. Independence remains the largest contributor, maintaining a stable share around 30% (approximately 610-624 students). White holds the second-largest share, fluctuating between 16.6% and 17.6% (331-366 students). Liberty maintains a consistent proportion around 15.6-15.9% (314-326 students), while Belvidere shows the most significant decline, dropping from 15.6% to 13.1% (314 to 274 students). Both Harmony and Hope show projected enrollment growth with Harmony increasing from 11.6% to 12.8% (234 to 269 students) and Hope rising from 9.6% to 11.1% (193 to 232 students).

TABLE 114
Projected Average Daily Enrollment in an All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Belvidere	313.5	288.6	274.7	274.4
Harmony	233.9	240.8	246.1	268.6
Hope	193.1	215.1	215.3	232.4
White	343.8	330.8	358.5	366.4
Independence	609.2	602.5	621.5	623.5
Liberty	318.8	314.4	323.9	325.5
Total Enrollment	2,012.3	1,992.2	2,040.1	2,090.8
Belvidere%	15.6%	14.5%	13.5%	13.1%
Harmony %	11.6%	12.1%	12.1%	12.8%
Hope %	9.6%	10.8%	10.6%	11.1%
White %	17.1%	16.6%	17.6%	17.5%
Independence %	30.3%	30.2%	30.5%	29.8%
Liberty %	15.8%	15.8%	15.9%	15.6%

TABLE 115
Projected Average Daily Enrollment in an All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“Current Cluster Only” Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029
Belvidere	313.5	288.6	274.7	274.4
Harmony	233.9	240.8	246.1	268.6
Hope	193.1	215.1	215.3	232.4
White	343.8	330.8	358.5	366.4
Total Enrollment	1,084.3	1,075.3	1,094.7	1,141.8
Belvidere%	28.9%	26.8%	25.1%	24.0%
Harmony %	21.6%	22.4%	22.5%	23.5%
Hope %	17.8%	20.0%	19.7%	20.4%
White %	31.7%	30.8%	32.8%	32.1%

Total enrollment in the “current cluster only” configuration follows a similar U-shaped pattern but at lower levels — starting from 1,084 students in 2026, slightly decreasing to 1,075 in 2027, before rising to 1,142 students by 2029. In this scenario, White represents the largest share at 31.7-32.1% (331-366 students), followed by Belvidere, which shows a declining share from 28.9% to 24.0% (314 to 274 students). Harmony maintains a gradually increasing share from 21.6% to 23.5% (234

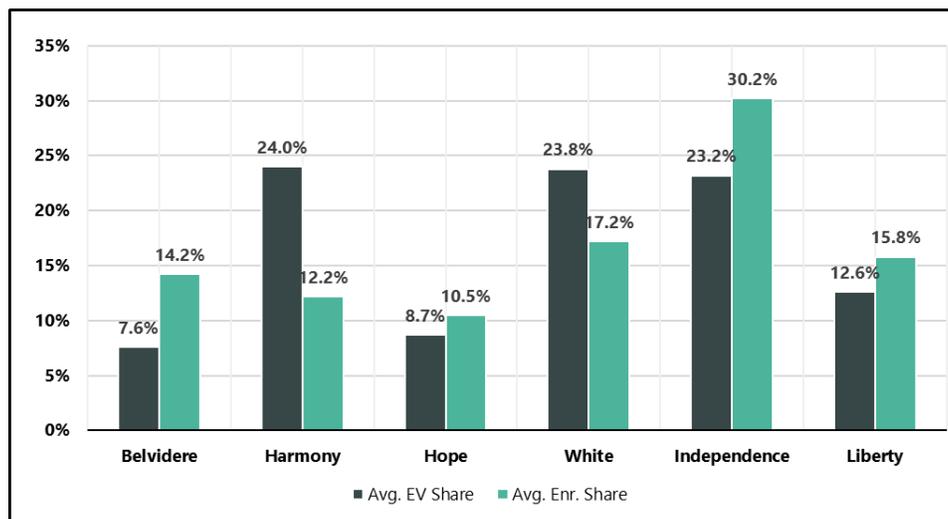
to 269 students), while Hope’s enrollment growth increases its share from 17.8% to 20.4% (193 to 232 students).

The divergent patterns in enrollment and equalized valuation across municipalities warrant a direct comparison to fully understand their implications for tax apportionment. The following table and chart present average shares over the four-year period (FY 2026-29) using both methods and highlights the key differences between property values and student enrollment in the communities in the cluster over both regionalization scenarios.

TABLE 116
Summary Comparison, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario

	Avg. EV Share	Avg. Enr. Share	Difference
Belvidere	7.6%	14.2%	6.6%
Harmony	24.0%	12.2%	-11.8%
Hope	8.7%	10.5%	1.8%
White	23.8%	17.2%	-6.6%
Independence	23.2%	30.2%	7.0%
Liberty	12.6%	15.8%	3.2%

CHART 14
EV Share vs Enrollment Share Comparison, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario



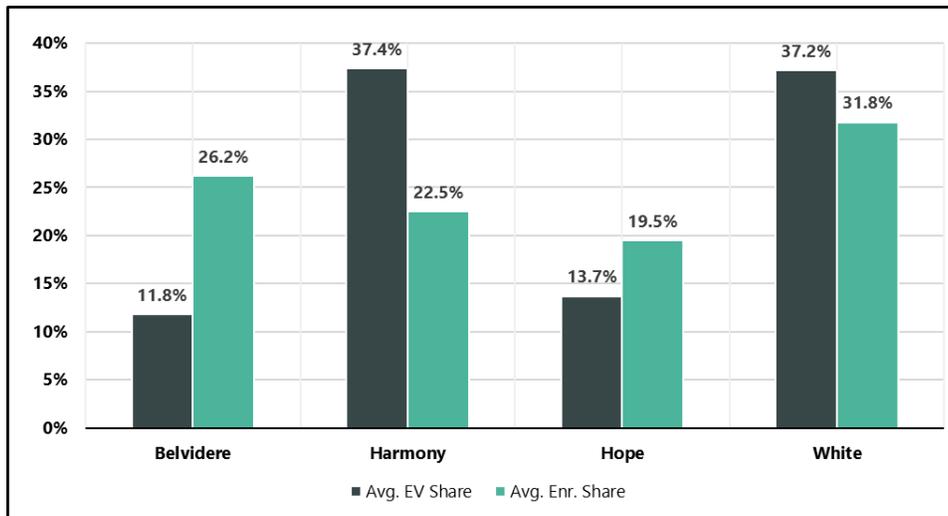
The contrast between equalized valuation and enrollment shares reveals significant disparities in how costs would be allocated under each method. Harmony shows the most distinct difference, while representing 24.0% of the district's equalized value, it accounts for only 12.2% of student enrollment, an 11.8 percentage point gap. Independence presents the inverse pattern, contributing 23.2% of equalized value but serving 30.2% of students. White similarly shows a significant disparity,

representing 23.8% of property value but 17.2% of enrollment. Belvidere, Hope, and Liberty all show smaller, but still meaningful differences, with each having higher enrollment shares than equalized value shares. These disparities emphasize the significant impact the choice of apportionment method would have on each municipality's tax contribution, and provide the rationale for examining various weighted combinations of the two methods.

TABLE 117
 Summary Comparison, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
 “Current Cluster Only” Scenario

	Avg. EV Share	Avg. Enr. Share	Difference
Belvidere	11.8%	26.2%	14.4%
Harmony	37.4%	22.5%	-14.9%
Hope	13.7%	19.5%	5.8%
White	37.2%	31.8%	-5.4%

CHART 15
 EV Share vs Enrollment Share Comparison, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
 “Current Cluster Only” Scenario



The contrast between apportionment methods is similarly pronounced in the “current cluster only” scenario. Harmony and White both represent significantly larger shares of equalized value (37.4% and 37.2% respectively) compared to their enrollment shares (22.5% and 31.8%). Conversely, Belvidere shows the largest disparity in the opposite direction, accounting for just 11.8% of equalized value but 26.2% of enrollment, a 14.4 percentage point difference. Hope similarly shows a higher enrollment share (19.5%) relative to its equalized value share (13.7%).

Tax Impact Analysis

Given these substantial disparities between equalized value and enrollment shares, it is important to examine how different combinations of the two methods would affect each municipality's tax contribution. The following tables present apportionment scenarios in ten-percentage-point increments, from 100% equalized value to 100% enrollment-based allocation.

It is important to note that tax levies are projected to increase annually in both the status quo and regionalization scenarios and that any potential tax savings or increases indicated in the tables below represent the difference between regionalization and maintaining separate districts in each given year, not changes from current tax levels. In other words, a projected savings typically means a smaller increase compared to the status quo, not necessarily a reduction from today's taxes.

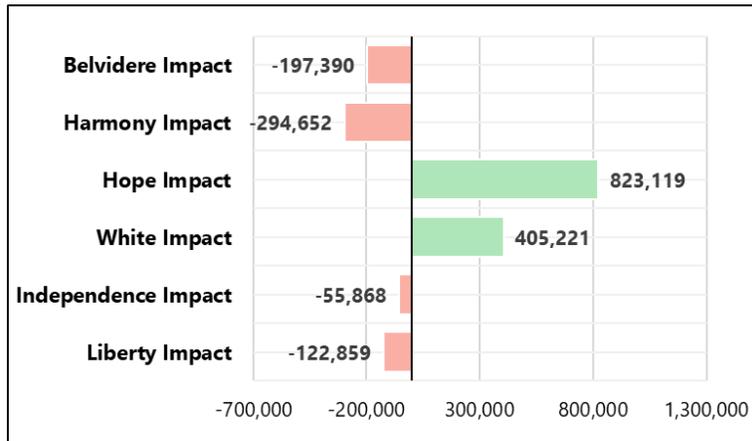
Table 118 and Chart 16 show the impact relative to the status quo for each tax apportionment method. The values included in the table are averages over the period from 2026 through 2029. Positive numbers represent potential tax savings, while negative numbers represent potential tax increases relative to the status quo.

TABLE 118
Average Tax Savings, FY 2026-29, “All Potential Constituents” Scenario¹⁰⁷

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Independence	Liberty
100% Equalized Value / 0% Enrollment	1,348,503	-3,085,308	1,248,570	-1,159,407	1,591,960	613,254
90% Equalized Value / 10% Enrollment	1,077,294	-2,595,720	1,173,929	-884,911	1,302,868	484,111
80% Equalized Value / 20% Enrollment	806,084	-2,106,131	1,099,289	-610,415	1,013,775	354,968
70% Equalized Value / 30% Enrollment	534,875	-1,616,542	1,024,649	-335,919	724,682	225,826
60% Equalized Value / 40% Enrollment	263,666	-1,126,953	950,008	-61,423	435,589	96,683
50% Equalized Value / 50% Enrollment	-7,544	-637,364	875,368	213,074	146,497	-32,460
43% Equalized Value / 57% Enrollment	-197,390	-294,652	823,119	405,221	-55,868	-122,859
40% Equalized Value / 60% Enrollment	-278,753	-147,776	800,727	487,570	-142,596	-161,602
30% Equalized Value / 70% Enrollment	-549,962	341,814	726,087	762,066	-431,689	-290,745
20% Equalized Value / 80% Enrollment	-821,171	831,402	651,446	1,036,562	-720,782	-419,887
10% Equalized Value / 90% Enrollment	-1,092,381	1,320,991	576,806	1,311,059	-1,009,874	-549,030
0% Equalized Value / 100% Enrollment	-1,363,590	1,810,580	502,166	1,585,555	-1,298,967	-678,173

¹⁰⁷ Tax savings shown as positive numbers, tax increases shown as negative numbers

CHART 16
 Average Tax Savings, FY 2026-29, “All Potential Constituents” Scenario
 Optimal 43% EV / 57% Enrollment Ratio



The table and chart illustrate the significant impact different apportionment ratios would have on each municipality. In the “all potential constituents” scenario, Harmony and White benefit most from ratios favoring enrollment while Belvidere, Independence, and Liberty benefit more from equalized valuation-heavy ratios. Hope sees increased savings across all scenarios, greater savings found at ratios weighting equalized valuation.

The model’s optimal ratio, which attempts to balance savings and minimize extreme impacts, is 43% equalized value / 57% enrollment. At this ratio, Belvidere, Harmony, Independence and Liberty would all experience cost increases while Hope and White would see tax savings relative to the average over the period in the status quo.

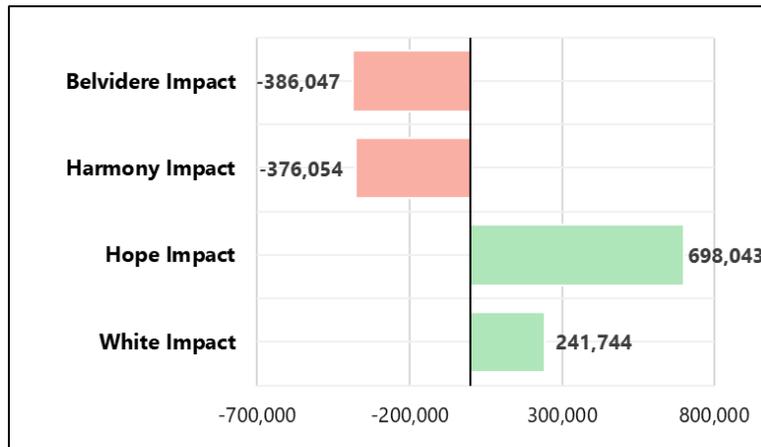
While the model attempts to identify a ratio permitted under state law that provides benefit to all communities, no such outcome is possible under current conditions. There is no combination of equalized valuation and enrollment parameters that produces tax savings for all municipalities without the inclusion of substantially higher cost savings. The consultants estimate that additional cost savings of more than \$2.7 million would be needed to reduce the total levy sufficiently for all communities to experience tax savings.

Next, Table 119 and Chart 17 examine the “current cluster only” scenario.

TABLE 119
Average Tax Savings, FY 2026-29, “Current Cluster Only” Scenario¹⁰⁸

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White
100% Equalized Value / 0% Enrollment	1,564,671	-2,401,173	1,497,657	-483,470
90% Equalized Value / 10% Enrollment	1,209,995	-2,032,969	1,352,273	-351,613
80% Equalized Value / 20% Enrollment	855,319	-1,664,766	1,206,889	-219,756
70% Equalized Value / 30% Enrollment	500,643	-1,296,562	1,061,504	-87,899
60% Equalized Value / 40% Enrollment	145,967	-928,359	916,120	43,958
50% Equalized Value / 50% Enrollment	-208,709	-560,156	770,735	175,815
45% Equalized Value / 55% Enrollment	-386,047	-376,054	698,043	241,744
40% Equalized Value / 60% Enrollment	-563,385	-191,952	625,351	307,672
30% Equalized Value / 70% Enrollment	-918,061	176,252	479,966	439,529
20% Equalized Value / 80% Enrollment	-1,272,737	544,455	334,582	571,386
10% Equalized Value / 90% Enrollment	-1,627,413	912,659	189,197	703,243
0% Equalized Value / 100% Enrollment	-1,982,089	1,280,862	43,813	835,100

CHART 17
Average Tax Savings, FY 2026-29, “Current Cluster Only” Scenario
“Optimal” 45% EV / 55% Enrollment Ratio



The table and chart above illustrate how apportionment ratios affect the four municipalities in the current cluster configuration. The patterns look very similar to the “all potential constituents” scenario with Harmony benefitting significantly from enrollment-heavy ratios (reaching savings of \$1.28M at 100% enrollment) and facing increased costs under equalized value-heavy ratios (up to -\$2.4M at 100% EV). Hope maintains savings across all scenarios but shows higher savings under EV-heavy ratios (peaking at \$1.49M). White transitions from increased costs under EV-heavy ratios to savings as enrollment weight increases, while Belvidere shows the opposite pattern.

¹⁰⁸ Tax savings shown as positive numbers, tax increases shown as negative numbers

The model's optimal ratio of 45% equalized value / 55% enrollment again attempts to balance impacts across the municipalities. However, at this ratio, only Hope and White would experience savings (\$698,043 and \$241,744 respectively), while both Belvidere and Harmony would face increased costs (-\$386,047 and -\$376,054 respectively), a similar pattern to that in the “all potential constituents” configuration.

As with the “all potential constituents” scenario, this analysis demonstrates that no combination of equalized valuation and enrollment parameters produces tax savings for all municipalities under current conditions. The opposing patterns of benefit between the municipalities again suggest that substantial additional cost savings would be necessary to achieve universal tax benefits in this configuration.

It's important to understand these financial outcomes in their proper context. The varying impacts across different apportionment ratios demonstrate the complex interplay between property wealth and student population in determining tax responsibility. Each district's outcome is shaped by both its relative property wealth and its proportion of students, with the selected apportionment ratio determining which factor carries more weight.

While operational efficiencies from regionalization can help reduce the total tax levy, the underlying mathematics of redistributing costs means that finding a ratio that benefits all communities remains challenging. Districts with significantly different proportions of property wealth versus student population will often see opposing effects under any given ratio. Therefore, decisions about regionalization in this cluster should consider the full spectrum of potential benefits – educational, operational, and programmatic – rather than focusing solely on tax impacts.

Tax Rate Implications

This subsection transforms the average tax impacts from total dollars into tax rates, something more familiar to taxpayers, and provides a format consistent with other presentations of tax impacts during the annual school budget process. A community's school tax rate is its total amount of school tax levy divided by its net valuation taxable multiplied by 100.

The tax rate analysis provides additional context to the financial impacts of regionalization. In the status quo, there is significant variation in tax rates across the six municipalities, ranging from Harmony's low of \$1.450 per \$100 of assessed value to Independence's high of \$2.214. Under the model's optimal apportionment ratio (43/57), Hope would see the largest rate reduction (-\$0.375), moving from one of the highest current rates (\$2.211) to a more moderate regional rate (\$1.836). White also experiences a rate reduction (-\$0.073), while the remaining municipalities see modest increases. While the total dollar impact analysis outlined earlier showed substantial swings in total tax obligation, the rate changes are relatively modest for most communities, with four of the six municipalities seeing changes of less than \$0.10 per \$100 of assessed value. Despite the appearance of significant dollar impacts, the underlying tax rate adjustments remain relatively moderate for most communities. The statewide average school tax rate currently sits at \$1.405 per \$100 of assessed value.

TABLE 120
Tax Rate per \$100 of Assessed Value, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“All Potential Constituents” Scenario

	Status Quo Avg Rate ¹⁰⁹	Regional Avg Rate ¹¹⁰	Difference
Belvidere	1.772	1.850	0.078
Harmony	1.450	1.513	0.062
Hope	2.211	1.836	-0.375
White	1.571	1.498	-0.073
Independence	2.214	2.225	0.011
Liberty	2.184	2.230	0.046

TABLE 121
Tax Rate per \$100 of Assessed Value, All-Purpose Regional, FY 2026-29
“Current Cluster Only” Scenario

	Status Quo Avg Rate ¹¹¹	Regional Avg Rate ¹¹²	Difference
Belvidere	1.772	1.925	0.153
Harmony	1.450	1.530	0.080
Hope	2.211	1.893	-0.318
White	1.571	1.527	-0.044

The tax rate impacts for the "current cluster only" scenario show similar patterns of variation, though with some differences in magnitude. In the status quo, the same range of tax rates exists among these four municipalities, from Harmony's low of \$1.450 per \$100 of assessed value to Hope's high of \$2.211. Under the model's optimal apportionment ratio (45/55), Hope would again see the largest rate reduction (-\$0.318), moving from its high current rate to a more moderate regional rate of \$1.893. White experiences a modest rate reduction (-\$0.044), while Belvidere would see the most significant rate increase (\$0.153), and Harmony would experience a modest increase (\$0.080). As in the “all potential constituents scenario”, current tax rates are all above the statewide average school tax rate of \$1.405 per \$100 of assessed value, and this would continue to be true under regionalization.

Comparing the tax rate impacts between the "all potential constituents" and "current cluster only" scenarios, we observe some similarities and differences. Belvidere's rate increase is larger in the “current cluster only” scenario (\$0.153 vs. \$0.078), making it the municipality most impacted by the

¹⁰⁹ Based on average projected status quo tax levy from 2026-29

¹¹⁰ Based on average projected tax levy from 2026-2029 using optimal apportionment ratio of 43/57

¹¹¹ Based on average projected status quo tax levy from 2026-2029

¹¹² Based on average projected tax levy from 2026-2029 using optimal apportionment ratio of 45/55

change. Hope maintains its position as the municipality seeing the largest rate reduction. White benefits from rate reductions in both scenarios, though slightly less in the “current cluster only” configuration (-\$0.044 vs. -\$0.073). Harmony's rate increase is slightly higher in the current cluster scenario (\$0.080 vs. \$0.062).

The overall spread of regional rates also differs between scenarios. In the “all potential constituents” scenario, regional rates range from \$1.498 to \$2.230, while in the “current cluster only” scenario, the range is narrower, spanning from \$1.527 to \$1.925. The inclusion of Great Meadows contributes to greater rate disparity in that regional configuration because both Independence and Liberty have higher tax rates than most districts in the Belvidere Cluster.

While projected rates under a regional configuration are generally compared to current rates by those who will ultimately make the decision to regionalize, or to the projected tax rates in the status quo (presented above), it may also be helpful to compare these rates to rates in other Warren county communities participating in regional school districts.

TABLE 122
Tax Rate per \$100 of Assessed Value, Warren County Municipalities, FY 2024

	Current School Tax Rate
Blairstown Township	1.839
Franklin Township	2.087
Frelinghuysen Township	1.635
Hardwick Township	2.032
Knowlton Township	2.484
Mansfield Township	2.051
Washington Borough	2.840
Washington Township	2.312

Insights

Having presented the projected tax impacts, two important points should be reiterated. First, the tax levies being apportioned in the regionalization scenarios presented in the previous tables are inclusive of cost savings described in the next subsection. The cost savings total \$178,000 in the “all potential constituents” scenario and \$558,000 in the “current cluster only” scenario and include consolidation of duplicated administrative and clerical staff positions as well as some reductions in audit costs and other professional services.

Secondly, the savings are *potential* savings only, and the consultants do not mean to imply that the amounts shown in the table will necessarily be reflected in the future tax levies in each municipality. It will be up to the future board of education of the regional district to decide how to allocate any cost savings stemming from regionalization. Tax relief is one of many possible uses of such savings.

The consultants estimate that at least \$2.7 million in cost savings would be necessary to create the conditions for universal tax benefits across all communities. Given the substantial difference between needed cost savings and those identified in this study, tables are not provided for alternative scenarios where the regional district’s board of education elects to repurpose cost savings for other educational programming rather than pass on those savings to taxpayers as tax relief. The patterns, trends and conclusions would all be the same as those presented above.

After examining all data, there does not exist the possibility of potential tax benefits to all constituent communities in either of the regionalization scenarios studied using currently identified cost savings. The model favors the 43%/57% ratio in the “all potential constituents” scenario and a 45%/55% ratio in the “current cluster only” scenario. Tables 123 and 124 below summarize the tax apportionment data at each of the model’s optimal ratios in both scenarios.

TABLE 123
Summary of Tax Apportionment Outputs at 43% Equalized Valuation / 57% Enrollment Ratio,
FY 2026-29, “All Potential Constituent” Regionalization Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029	4-year Avg.
Regional District Total Tax Levy	40,111,200	40,924,575	41,754,218	42,600,454	41,347,612
Belvidere Tax Levy	4,907,684	4,731,027	4,571,245	4,517,793	4,681,937
Harmony Tax Levy	6,959,279	7,014,137	7,163,166	7,403,034	7,134,904
Hope Tax Levy	3,792,540	4,097,198	4,041,249	4,193,787	4,031,194
White Tax Levy	7,860,836	8,033,062	8,490,972	8,786,366	8,292,809
Independence Tax Levy	10,883,281	11,174,626	11,378,987	11,535,451	11,243,086
Liberty Tax Levy	5,707,580	5,874,525	6,108,600	6,164,024	5,963,682
Belvidere Impact	-555,453	-291,752	-43,184	100,829	-197,390
Harmony Impact	-320,849	-242,938	-256,543	-358,279	-294,652
Hope Impact	918,546	708,110	860,165	805,655	823,119
White Impact	580,559	577,160	291,455	171,709	405,221
Independence Impact	-35,524	-98,043	-76,054	-13,852	-55,868
Liberty Impact	-29,708	-94,966	-218,269	-148,493	-122,859
Belvidere Tax Rate Impact	0.2195	0.1153	0.0171	-0.0398	0.078
Harmony Tax Rate Impact	0.0680	0.0515	0.0544	0.0760	0.062
Hope Tax Rate Impact	-0.4183	-0.3225	-0.3917	-0.3669	-0.375
White Tax Rate Impact	-0.1048	-0.1042	-0.0526	-0.0310	-0.073
Independence Tax Rate Impact	0.0070	0.0194	0.0150	0.0027	0.011
Liberty Tax Rate Impact	0.0111	0.0355	0.0816	0.0555	0.046

Belvidere % of Tax Responsibility	12.2%	11.6%	10.9%	10.6%	11.3%
Harmony % of Tax Responsibility	17.3%	17.1%	17.2%	17.4%	17.3%
Hope % of Tax Responsibility	9.5%	10.0%	9.7%	9.8%	9.7%
White % of Tax Responsibility	19.6%	19.6%	20.3%	20.6%	20.0%
Independence % of Tax Responsibility	27.1%	27.3%	27.3%	27.1%	27.2%
Liberty % of Tax Responsibility	14.2%	14.4%	14.6%	14.5%	14.4%
Potential Net Taxpayer Savings	557,571	557,571	557,571	557,570	557,570
Cumulative Benefit	557,571	1,115,141	1,672,712	2,230,282	-

TABLE 124
Summary of Tax Apportionment Outputs at 45% Equalized Valuation / 55% Enrollment Ratio,
FY 2026-29, “Current Cluster Only” Regionalization Scenario

	2026	2027	2028	2029	4-year Avg.
Regional District Total Tax Levy	23,965,456	24,448,318	24,940,838	25,443,209	24,699,455
Belvidere Tax Levy	5,106,718	4,926,920	4,776,549	4,672,189	4,870,594
Harmony Tax Levy	6,985,222	7,100,588	7,274,159	7,505,253	7,216,306
Hope Tax Levy	3,886,531	4,228,799	4,191,266	4,318,483	4,156,270
White Tax Levy	7,986,984	8,192,012	8,698,864	8,947,285	8,456,286
Belvidere Impact	-754,487	-487,645	-248,488	-53,567	-386,047
Harmony Impact	-346,792	-329,389	-367,536	-460,498	-376,054
Hope Impact	824,555	576,509	710,148	680,959	698,043
White Impact	454,411	418,210	83,563	10,790	241,744
Belvidere Tax Rate Impact	0.2981	0.1927	0.0982	0.0212	0.153
Harmony Tax Rate Impact	0.0735	0.0698	0.0779	0.0976	0.080
Hope Tax Rate Impact	-0.3755	-0.2625	-0.3234	-0.3101	-0.318
White Tax Rate Impact	-0.0821	-0.0755	-0.0151	-0.0019	-0.044
Belvidere % of Tax Responsibility	21.3%	20.2%	19.2%	18.4%	19.7%
Harmony % of Tax Responsibility	29.1%	29.0%	29.2%	29.5%	29.2%
Hope % of Tax Responsibility	16.2%	17.3%	16.8%	17.0%	16.8%
White % of Tax Responsibility	33.3%	33.5%	34.9%	35.2%	34.2%
Potential Net Taxpayer Savings	177,686	177,686	177,687	177,685	177,686
Cumulative Potential Savings	177,686	355,372	533,059	710,744	

Transitional Methods of Apportionment

P.L.2021, c.402 permits a board of education to establish a transitional methodology, not to exceed ten years, of the apportionment method adopted by the voters provided that the methodology is agreed to by all participating districts. The language is designed to address situations where standard apportionment methods may not benefit all communities during the consolidation process. The transitional method was envisioned as a tool to facilitate school district regionalization in cases where immediate implementation of a new apportionment method might create financial hardships or disparities among the participating districts. It provides a mechanism to smooth out potential tax impacts over time, making the regionalization process more palatable to all stakeholders.

As described above, the standard apportionment methods do not allow for financial benefits to all constituents in either regionalization scenario. The transitional flexibility afforded by P.L. 2021, c.402, while helpful for smoothing changes and useful for finding creative arrangements in some consolidation configurations, is unable to fundamentally solve the underlying mathematical challenge in this cluster.

22. Operating Expenses

Budgetary Costs per Student

Tables 125 through 129 highlight the spending priorities of each district through budgetary per student costs broken into five categories by the State: classroom instruction, support services, administration, operations and maintenance, and extracurriculars. Each category then ranks the districts against their peers across the state in terms of grade-level structure.¹¹³

TABLE 125
Budgetary Per Student Costs, Belvidere, 2022-23¹¹⁴

	\$ Per Student	Peer Rank	% of Total	State Median \$	State Median %
Total Budgetary Per Student Costs	20,224	38 51	-	18,727	-
Classroom Instruction	11,868	38 51	58.7%	11,006	58.8%
Support Services	2,386	9 51	11.8%	3,233	16.9%
Administration	2,457	45 51	12.2%	2,012	10.5%
Operations and Maintenance	2,537	46 51	12.5%	2,130	11.4%
Extracurriculars	976	46 51	4.8%	437	2.3%

¹¹³ Ranking is from lowest to highest spending among NJ's 80 grade K-8 school districts with less than 400 students (Harmony, Hope, and White), among its 65 K-8 school districts with between 401 and 750 students (Great Meadows), and among its 51 grade K-12 school districts with less than 1,800 students (Belvidere)

¹¹⁴ Data in Tables 125 through 129 from NJDOE Taxpayers' Guide to Education Spending, 2023; K-8 state medians are for all K-8s regardless of enrollment, and K-12 state medians are for all K-12s regardless of enrollment

TABLE 126
Budgetary Per Student Costs, Harmony, 2022-23

	\$ Per Student	Peer Rank	% of Total	State Median \$	State Median %
Total Budgetary Per Student Costs	25,816	64 80	-	19,900	-
Classroom Instruction	16,361	69 80	63.4%	11,799	58.0%
Support Services	3,322	30 80	12.9%	3,493	17.6%
Administration	2,476	74 80	9.6%	2,070	10.4%
Operations and Maintenance	3,446	61 80	13.3%	2,346	11.8%
Extracurriculars	177	31 80	0.7%	177	0.9%

TABLE 127
Budgetary Per Student Costs, Hope, 2022-23

	\$ Per Students	Peer Rank	% of Total	State Median \$	State Median %
Total Budgetary Per Student Costs	22,672	49 80	-	19,900	-
Classroom Instruction	13,176	47 80	58.1%	11,799	58.0%
Support Services	4,194	47 80	18.5%	3,493	17.6%
Administration	2,475	73 80	10.9%	2,070	10.4%
Operations and Maintenance	2,631	43 80	11.6%	2,346	11.8%
Extracurriculars	184	34 80	0.8%	177	0.9%

TABLE 128
Budgetary Per Students Costs, White, 2022-23

	\$ Per Students	Peer Rank	% of Total	State Median \$	State Median %
Total Budgetary Per Students Costs	23,493	57 80	-	19,900	-
Classroom Instruction	14,716	62 80	62.6%	11,799	58.0%
Support Services	4,214	48 80	17.9%	3,493	17.6%
Administration	2,326	67 80	9.9%	2,070	10.4%
Operations and Maintenance	2,205	27 80	9.4%	2,346	11.8%
Extracurriculars	32	8 80	0.1%	177	0.9%

TABLE 129
Budgetary Per Student Costs, Great Meadows, 2022-23

	\$ Per Student	Peer Rank	% of Total	State Median \$	State Median %
Total Budgetary Per Student Costs	18,500	26 65	-	19,900	-
Classroom Instruction	10,678	24 65	57.7%	11,799	58.0%
Support Services	3,371	33 65	18.2%	3,493	17.6%
Administration	1,849	15 65	10.0%	2,070	10.4%
Operations and Maintenance	2,479	43 65	13.4%	2,346	11.8%
Extracurriculars	95	9 65	0.5%	177	0.9%

Budgetary costs per student are comparable among districts in a way that total costs are not. Total costs include items such as expenditures funded by restricted grants, pension contributions, tuition payments to other districts and private schools for students with disabilities, debt service expenditures, and principal and interest payments for the lease purchase of land and buildings.

The elementary districts are in two separate peer groups: Harmony, Hope, and White are small K-8s, and Great Meadows is a medium K-8. In terms of total budgetary costs per student, it must be noted that the state median of \$19,900 is for all K-8s – small, medium, and large. Great Meadows (\$18,500) is below the state median, while Harmony (\$25,816), White (\$23,493), and Hope (\$22,672) are all well above it. It is difficult for any K-8 district with a small student enrollment to be efficient financially. Consolidating grades 6-8 (or even 7-8) into a combined middle school program would be more effective educationally but could result in some greater inefficiencies given the even smaller pK-5 enrollments.

It is clear that all four districts prioritize direct spending on students in terms of the percentage of dollars allocated to classroom instruction. Harmony at 63.4% of its budget and White at 62.2% are exceptional in this regard, and Hope (58.1%) and Great Meadows (57.7%) are keeping pace with the state median (58.0%). This is a strong positive indicator as it provides direct student academic experiences, and therefore should receive primary attention and commitment in the district budget.

Another item worth noting is that Harmony (9.6%), White (9.9%), and Great Meadows (10.0%) are below the state median percentage (10.4%) in administrative spending, and Hope (10.9%) is just above. This is likely due to the number of positions with multiple responsibilities in each district, confirming previous analysis in this study. Lower spending on administration is often identified by the public as an area to realize potential efficiencies in education.

As a small K-12 district, Belvidere suffers from the same efficiency issues as its small K-8 sending districts. Its total budgetary per student cost (\$20,224) is 8% higher than the state median of \$18,727 for all K-12s. However, Belvidere is at the state median percentage in classroom instruction. It is also among the highest in its peer group and more than double the state median percentage in

extracurriculars. Combining these two spending categories shows how much Belvidere prioritizes spending on direct student programming.

Cost Savings

Table 130 presents the cost savings that could be anticipated in an enlarged all-purpose regional district under the “all potential constituents” scenario, and Table 131 presents the cost savings that could be anticipated under the “current constituents only” scenario. Despite the cost savings identified and presented in the table, all existing programs would be maintained.

The primary areas targeted for cost reduction include audit processes, professional services, and administrative staffing. The Education and Program domain¹¹⁵ and the Shared Services section provide additional support for these projections, particularly with regard to staff consolidation.

Audit cost estimates were derived by comparing current expenditures across constituent districts with the projected cost of a single audit for the enlarged regional district. Similarly, legal services costs were estimated based on current average expenses, with the expectation that these services could be consolidated in an enlarged regional district.

TABLE 130
Cost Savings Opportunities, “All Potential Constituent” Regionalization Scenario

Items	Savings Amount
Consolidation of Administrative Personnel	
Superintendents (3 to 1)	446,041
Business Administrators (3 to 2)	213,076
Asst Supt/Instructional Supervisor (0 to 1 Asst Supt)	(-210,000)
Special Education Directors (no change)	0
Technology Directors (2 to 1)	66,592
Facilities Directors (2 to 1)	105,612
Principals (6 to 7)	(-239,830)
Treasurers of School Monies (3 to 1)	20,000
Consolidation of Clerical Personnel (-2 FTE)	44,356
Reduction in Audit Costs	57,000
Reduction in Legal Costs	41,000
Consolidation of Budget Software Costs	0
Reduction in Dues & Fees	13,724
Health and Other Non-Salary Benefits	0
Total Estimated Cost Savings	557,571

¹¹⁵ See the subheading “Projected Staffing Needs”

TABLE 131
Cost Savings Opportunities, “Current Cluster Only” Regionalization Scenario

Items	Savings Amount
Consolidation of Administrative Personnel	
Superintendent (3 to 1)	300,534
Business Administrators (2 to 1)	88,076
Asst Supt/Instructional Supervisor (0 to 1)	(-100,000)
Special Education Directors (no change)	0
Technology Directors (no change)	0
Facilities Directors (2 to 1)	49,000
Principals (4 to 6)	(-329,030)
Treasurers of School Monies (2 to 1)	10,000
Consolidation of Clerical Personnel (-2 FTE)	
Reduction in Audit Costs	39,500
Reduction in Legal Costs	14,000
Consolidation of Budget Software Costs	0
Reduction in Dues & Fees	6,424.00
Health and Other Non-Salary Benefits ¹¹⁶	0
Total Estimated Cost Savings	177,686

Both regionalization scenarios project modest financial benefits through administrative consolidation. The estimated cost savings of \$178,000 in the current cluster and \$558,000 with all constituents would primarily come from consolidating administrative functions and reducing duplication across the districts. However, these savings are partially offset by necessary investments in new positions and restructuring to serve the region.

The primary areas targeted for cost reduction include audit processes, professional services, and administrative and support staffing. Under the "current cluster only" regional scenario, there would be a reduction from two superintendent positions to one (\$300,534 savings), business administrator from two to one (\$88,076 savings), facilities directors from two to one (\$49,000 savings), and treasurer of school monies from two to one (\$10,000 savings).

Several factors work to partially offset these savings. An instructional supervisor position would be added to manage the regional district at an estimated cost of \$100,000. Additional principal positions would be needed to maintain appropriate school-level leadership.

¹¹⁶ While no health related or other non-salary benefits were included in the cost savings in this study, the consultants identified these areas as potential for additional savings pending further analysis of personnel and claims history.

Under the “all potential constituents” scenario, higher savings of \$558,000 would be realized through the consolidation of three superintendent positions to one (\$446,041 in savings), a reduction from three business administrators to one plus the addition of an assistant business administrator (\$88,076), consolidation of clerical positions (\$44,336 in savings), and other administrative roles.

The Education and Program domain¹¹⁷ and the Shared Services section of this study provide additional support for these projected savings, particularly with regard to staff consolidation.

Audit cost estimates were derived by comparing current expenditures across constituent districts with the projected cost of a single audit for the regional district. Similarly, legal services costs were estimated based on current average expenses, with the expectation that these services could be consolidated in a regional district.

It is important to note that while the identified savings in both regional scenarios are meaningful, they fall significantly short of the \$2.7 million in cost savings that would be needed to achieve universal tax benefits across all municipalities, as described in the tax impact analysis subsection. The gap between achievable cost savings and the threshold needed for universal tax benefits represents a significant challenge to the financial feasibility of regionalization.

Grades 6-8 Combined Middle School Option

The consultants examined a scenario where the districts in the current cluster would close their individually operated grades 6-8 programs and send students to a single combined middle school program. While this approach could potentially generate savings through program consolidation, the financial implications are complex and interconnected.

The closing of educational programs in grades 6-8 in Harmony, Hope, and White would create certain efficiencies through consolidated staffing, more efficient deployment of specialized staff (e.g., art, music, language, etc.), and reduced curriculum and materials costs. The receiving district would face increased operational costs and additional staffing needs to accommodate the expanded student population.¹¹⁸ However, the sending districts, while eliminating middle school operations, could experience increased inefficiencies through diseconomies of scale as the remaining pK-5 programs spread fixed costs and administrative overhead across fewer students. Additionally, any operational savings in the sending districts would be at least partially offset by new tuition payments to the receiving district.

The operational complexities and interconnected cost implications suggest that the primary motivation for pursuing such a configuration should be educational rather than financial. Any potential cost savings would likely be secondary to other benefits such as expanded program offerings and enhanced educational opportunities that could come from operating a single, larger, middle school program. Without a comprehensive analysis of current program-level costs and

¹¹⁷ See the subheading “Projected Staffing Needs”

¹¹⁸ Personnel needs in the combined program would be expected to be addressed largely with existing staff members

detailed implementation planning (an undertaking beyond the scope of this study), the consultants cannot definitively determine the exact costs of this option.

The consultants did develop a generalized model that can provide the boards of education with some information to help envision the potential for a combined middle school program. This is a necessarily “broad stroke” approach that has not been vetted with administrators who would be tasked with creating such a program. The following assumptions are made about the model:

- Enrollments come from this study's 2025-26 study projections;
- Homerooms are calculated using the state standard of 24 students maximum per section;
- Staff numbers come from the 2023-24 school year as gathered for this study;
- Special Education teachers, paraprofessionals, and CST members are not included in the model as the services are individualized to each child, though additional study could find potential efficiencies from combining certain programs at one site;
- pK-8 Physical Education and Specials teachers are estimated to use half of their full time equivalent (FTE) capacity for grades 6-8;
- Principals and nurses cannot be downsized from 1.0 FTE at the pK-8 districts;
- Belvidere devotes 0.5 FTE of a principal/assistant principal to grades 6-8 students currently;
- Teacher salaries are from the 2021-22 Taxpayer Guide to Education Spending, increased by 3% per year to 2025-26;
- Salaries for nurses, counselors, and media specialists are \$5,000 more than teachers due to typically higher levels of education;
- Administrative and clerical salaries are estimated based on market rates;
- Benefits are estimated at \$35,000;
- 80% of spending is considered to be for personnel with 20% for non-personnel;
- 50% of non-personnel costs (10% of total) have the potential for savings (e.g., instructional resources, extracurriculars);
- 50% of non-personnel costs (10% of total) are fixed and unavailable for savings (e.g., facility operations, insurances);
- Core teachers teach 4 classes per day and have 1 period per day for intervention and enrichment; and
- Students can be scheduled for up to 3 periods per week of Physical Education and 2 periods per day of Art, Music, Technology, and/or Spanish.

Table 133 shows a district breakdown of the 16 existing homerooms being used across the cluster for grades 6-8. A comparison with the projected enrollment data in Table 132 shows that some existing homerooms will be close to the state standard of 24 students maximum per classroom in 2025-26, while others may have as few as 12-15 students. Using the maximum standard, the calculations for a combined middle school program come to 10.6 homerooms. The model projects 12 homerooms with an average class size of 21-22 students.

TABLE 132
Projected Student Enrollments, Belvidere Cluster, Grades 6-8, 2025-26

	Harmony	Hope	White	SENDING	Belvidere	TOTAL
Grade 6	19	13	21	53	18	71
Grade 7	22	12	26	60	28	88
Grade 8	29	16	21	66	30	96
TOTAL	70	41	68	179	76	255

TABLE 133
Projected Homerooms, 2025-26

	Existing 2024-25						Calculated 2025-26	Projected 2025-26
	Harmony	Hope	White	SENDING	Belvidere	TOTAL		
Grade 6	1	1	1	3	1	4	3.0	4
Grade 7	1	1	2	4	2	6	3.7	4
Grade 8	2	1	1	4	2	6	4.0	4
TOTAL	4	3	4	11	5	16	10.6	12

TABLE 134
Grade 6-8 Teachers

	Existing Teachers						Projected Teachers	Difference
	Harmony	Hope	White	SENDING	Belvidere	TOTAL		
ELA-Math-Science-SS	4.0	3.5	7.0	14.5	4.5	19.0	12.0	-7.0
Phys Ed (36 pds/wk)	0.5	0.4	0.5	1.4	0.5	1.9	1.5	-0.4
Music (24 pds/wk) ¹¹⁹	0.5	0.3	1.0	1.8	0.5	2.3	2.0	-0.3
Art (24 pds/wk)	0.3	0.2	0.5	1.0	0.2	1.2	1.0	-0.2
Technology (24 pds/wk)	0.5	0.0	0.5	1.0	0.2	1.2	1.0	-0.2
Spanish (24 pds/wk)	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.7	0.5	1.2	1.0	-0.2
TOTAL	6.1	4.6	9.7	20.4	6.4	26.8	18.5	-8.3

¹¹⁹ Instrumental and vocal ensemble groups would be added to this teaching load

TABLE 135
Grade 6-8 Support Staff

	Existing Support Staff						Projected Support Staff	Difference
	Harmony	Hope	White	SENDING	Belvidere	TOTAL		
Counselors	0.5	0.5	0.5	1.5	0.5	2.0	2.0	0.0
Nurses	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.5	1.0	0.5
Media Specialists	0.5	0.5	0.5	1.5	0.3	1.8	1.0	-0.8
Principals/APs	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.5	1.5	1.0
Clerical Staff	1.0	1.0	1.0	3.0	1.0	4.0	2.0	-2.0
TOTAL	2.0	2.0	2.0	6.0	2.8	8.8	7.5	-1.3

To cost out the changes, the model considers the numbers of teachers and support staff currently employed for grades 6-8 and projects the staffing needs for a combined middle school program. Again, the program has not been vetted by stakeholders in the cluster and is simply intended to demonstrate a possible scenario.

Table 136 takes the personnel data above and projects overall costs. Teacher salaries were calculated as the average of the four districts' median salaries adjusted by 3% per year for 2025-26 (\$82,000). The principal/assistant principal salary was estimated at \$120,000 and clerical staff salaries were estimated at \$60,000. With non-personnel costs at 20% of the total, the costs to run the existing middle level programs are projected at about \$4.9 million. The projected cost of a model combined middle school program comes in at just under \$3.7 million, providing an economy of scale of some \$1.2 million.

TABLE 136
Projected Operational Costs, Combined Middle School Program

	Existing Costs for Sending District Grades 6-8 Programs	Existing Costs for Belvidere Grades 6-8 Programs	Existing Costs for All Grades 6-8 Programs	Model Costs for Combined Grades 6-8 Program
Teachers	\$2,386,800	\$748,800	\$3,135,600	\$2,164,500
Support Staff	\$651,000	\$331,100	\$982,100	\$910,500
Personnel	\$3,037,800	\$1,079,900	\$4,117,700	\$3,075,000
Non-Personnel	\$607,560	\$215,980	\$823,540	\$615,000
TOTAL	\$3,645,360	\$1,295,880	\$4,941,240	\$3,690,000

Table 137 lays out two scenarios for projected tuition costs to the sending districts: one calculated directly from the model above (model cost of \$3,690,000 divided by the projected enrollment of 255

students); and the other estimated later in this study’s Tuition section based on tuition histories and market comparisons. Both tuition calculations show a lower cost than the projected \$3.7 million cost of the model combined program. The actual tuition would be reconciled two years after the program has operated, just as it does for all other send-receive tuitions.

TABLE 137
Projected Tuition Costs, Combined Middle School Program

	Projected Tuition per Student	Sending District Total Tuition for Model Grades 6-8 Program
Model Projection	\$14,471	\$2,590,235
Study Projection	\$18,530	\$3,316,870

The Transportation section of this study addresses the impact of a combined middle school program in some detail. In summary, it projects no cost increase to transport middle school students to the Belvidere HS/ES campus. This is because sending district high school students are already being transported there, and the existing buses are well below capacity and able to accommodate the additional students. A transportation increase of \$280,000 is projected if White ES is chosen as the combined middle school site for grades 7-8.

Grades pK-8’s with Closing Belvidere HS Option

The consultants also considered a scenario involving the closure of Belvidere HS with constituent districts individually arranging to send their students to neighboring high schools. While this could theoretically reduce some operational costs, the financial and operational implications would be extremely complex and potentially disadvantageous.

The closure of Belvidere HS would eliminate certain direct operational costs, but these savings would likely be more than offset by new tuition payments to multiple receiving districts, increased and more complex transportation costs, stranded costs (including facilities maintenance and tenured staff obligations), and diseconomies of scale in the remaining Belvidere pK-8 program.

Given these factors, along with the complexity of establishing multiple new send-receive relationships, this option appears less viable than maintaining the current high school configuration or pursuing regionalization. The potential disruption to educational services combined with uncertain and potentially higher costs suggests this alternative may not be in the best interest of the constituent communities.

23. Debt Allocation & Borrowing Margin

When school districts merge into a regional district, state law requires that all issued and outstanding bonds, notes, or other financial obligations of the individual districts become the shared responsibility of the new regional district. The debt consolidation process is a standard and mandatory component of regionalization, designed to ensure equitable treatment of all member communities within the new district configuration. Flexibility introduced by P.L. 2021, c.402 provides a new process for districts to address disparate debt levels or debt-related concerns that might otherwise be barriers to regionalization through the use of a transitional method of apportionment for up to 10 years, provided that the transitional method is approved the Commissioner of Education and is agreed to by all participating districts.

Some districts may enter regionalization carrying significant debt from recent building projects or renovations, while others may have minimal or no outstanding obligations. In the proposed regionalization scenarios each community would share the responsibility of paying both principal and interest on all existing debt, regardless of which former district originally incurred it. This debt consolidation can be a contentious aspect of the regionalization process, but the consultants emphasize that a holistic view of facilities conditions and future needs should inform these discussions. Districts that have recently invested in facility improvements are contributing updated, modern spaces that will benefit all students in the regional district. Conversely, districts entering with minimal debt may have deferred necessary facility improvements, potentially creating future capital expenditures that the regional district will need to address. Rather than viewing existing debt in isolation, communities should consider both the immediate and shared benefits of recently improved facilities and the long-term capital needs across all buildings that the regional district will ultimately need to address.

Tables 138 and 139 identify the debt service and borrowing margin amounts for each district as they currently exist. These districts in the Belvidere Cluster are unusual in that none currently have any outstanding bonded debt. The consultants have confirmed with the school business administrators that no debt was issued subsequent to the June 30, 2023 ACFR.

Great Meadows does have existing debt and although the debt will be retired next year, the district is proposing a referendum vote in March 2025 to fund an \$8.1M project that would replace the retiring debt. As stated earlier, any debt would become an obligation of the new regional district if Great Meadows becomes a constituent. The table above does not include the proposed new project debt since the referendum vote has not taken place at the time of this study.

TABLE 138
Debt Service as of June 30, 2023, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows¹²⁰

	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029-31
Belvidere	0	0	0	0	0
Harmony	0	0	0	0	0
Hope	0	0	0	0	0
White	0	0	0	0	0
Total Bel Cluster	0	0	0	0	0
Great Meadows Debt	546,000	0	0	0	0
Great Meadows ESIP ¹²¹	194,253	200,505	206,960	213,623	512,688
Total Great Meadows	740,253	200,505	206,960	213,623	512,688
Total Bel & GM	740,253	200,505	206,960	213,623	512,688

TABLE 139
Borrowing Margin as of June 30, 2023, Belvidere Cluster and Great Meadows

	Average Equalized Valuation Taxable Property	Debt Limit	Net Bonded School Debt	Legal Debt Margin
Belvidere	210,937,776	8,437,511	-	8,437,511
Harmony	611,538,450	18,346,154	-	18,346,154
Hope	265,290,825	7,958,725	-	7,958,725
White	608,936,307	18,268,089	-	18,268,089
Total Bel Cluster	1,696,703,358	53,010,479	-	53,010,479
Great Meadows	953,001,395	28,590,042	1,045,000	27,545,042
Total Bel & GM	2,649,704,753	81,600,521	1,045,000	80,555,521
pK-12 Regional Debt Limit Bel Cluster	1,696,703,358	67,868,134	-	67,868,134
pK-12 Regional Debt Limit Bel & GM	2,649,704,753	105,988,190	1,045,000	104,943,190

¹²⁰ Annual Comprehensive Financial Report, 2023

¹²¹ Energy Savings Improvement Program (ESIP). The obligations presented in the table were financed through a lease-purchase agreement with an original issue of \$2.6 million and an interest rate of 2.363%

24. Collective Bargaining Agreement

P.L.2021, c.402 outlines the conditions of regional district formation, among those being provisions for the main collective bargaining agreements (CBA). It states, "... the newly formed regional district shall recognize each majority representative of the existing bargaining units in the largest constituent district as the majority representatives of those separate bargaining units of employees."¹²² It notes further that if there is a classification of employees that does not have a CBA in the largest constituent district, the CBA of the next largest would apply.

*... the salary guide and terms and conditions of employment, whether established through a collective negotiations agreement or past practice, of the largest constituent school district shall apply in full after three years following the formation of the regional district or until a successor agreement is negotiated with the majority representative of the new school district, whichever occurs first. The salary guide and terms and conditions of employment that will apply pursuant to the provisions of this subsection shall be based upon the terms and conditions of employment of the largest constituent district made up of only the identical grade levels. In the event that there is no constituent district made up of only the identical grade levels, the salary guide and terms and conditions of employment that will apply pursuant to the provisions of this subsection shall be based upon the terms and conditions of employment of the largest constituent district containing the identical grade levels;*¹²³

This suggests that Belvidere's CBA would govern staff in all grades after the initial three year period if a successor agreement is not reached in that time. As noted, a successor agreement would need to be negotiated between the new board and new association representatives.

The following review of the main CBAs for Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows intends to provide useful information to aid the negotiations process should the districts decide to form an all purpose regional district, or can be used simply as points for comparison and synthesis in future negotiations.

Expiration Dates

It is important to note that this analysis is based upon the CBAs in effect on June 30, 2024. The expiration dates for the CBAs in Belvidere, Great Meadows, and Harmony expired on June 30, 2024, while the Hope and White CBAs will expire on June 30, 2025. Should a new all purpose regional be created prior to the expiration of an existing CBA, the statute's provisions as noted previously would hold. If it should occur after this date, the statute goes on to say,

... whenever the salary guide and terms and conditions of employment of one or more school districts seeking to join a newly formed or existing limited purpose or all purpose regional district is set to expire upon the formation of the new regional district, the school

¹²² N.J.S.A. 18A:13-47.5

¹²³ N.J.S.A. 18A:13-47.5

district may: (a) elect to adopt the expiring salary guide and terms and conditions of employment for a period not to exceed one year or until a successor agreement is negotiated with the majority representative of the new regional district, whichever occurs first; or (b) elect to adopt the salary guide and terms and conditions of employment of the largest comparable district joining the new regional district.

Recognition Clauses

The recognition clause identifies who is, and often who is not, represented by the primary CBA. All agreements include certificated staff, but there is variance on the inclusion of non-certificated staff. All contracts exclude administrative personnel such as the superintendent, business administrator, principals, supervisors, and other administrative staff. Outside of certificated staff:

- Belvidere includes teacher aides, administrative assistants, and custodians;
- Harmony includes teacher aides, but neither administrative assistants nor custodians;
- Hope includes custodians, but not teacher aides, and there is no mention of administrative assistants;
- White includes teacher aides, custodians, and cafeteria workers, but not administrative assistants; and
- Great Meadows includes no non-certificated personnel.

Grievance Procedures

The most important aspect of the grievance procedure is whether disputes end ultimately in binding or advisory arbitration. The CBAs for each of the five districts include binding arbitration in the contract language.

School Calendars and Working Conditions

The teacher workday differs from district to district from 183 to 185 days. The Belvidere CBA calls for 184 days for teachers and 182 for support employees with a maximum of 181 student contact days. The Harmony CBA has the greatest number of teacher days at 185 including at least one preparation day and one day for professional learning prior to pupil attendance. The Hope CBA calls for 183 teacher days and 180 student days, with 2 professional learning days before school starts, while the White CBA includes 184 teacher days with a minimum of four days without students present. The White CBA also includes parameters for paraprofessionals, cafeteria workers, and 12-month custodians. The Great Meadows contract also calls for 184 teacher days, with two of those days scheduled before the first day of classes and a maximum of 180 student contact days.

Elementary teachers in the Belvidere schools are required to arrive 15 minutes before the start of the student day and stay for at least 15 minutes following dismissal. The language around high school teachers is similar, but teachers are expected to arrive 10 minutes before the start of the student day

and stay for an additional 10 minutes after dismissal. There is no specific language in the contract outlining the exact number of hours and minutes that constitute a teacher day. The Belvidere CBA also includes extensive language around work hours and conditions for administrative assistants and custodians.

The length of the teacher workday in the remaining four districts is described in more traditional fashion with Harmony teachers working a 6 hour 55 minute day, Hope teachers working a 6 hour 53 minute day, White teachers working a 6 hour 30 minute day, and Great Meadows teachers working a 7 hour 10 minute day. Several of these CBAs include a provision for teachers to leave early on Fridays or on the last day of the work week following student dismissal.

Teachers have a guaranteed daily, duty free lunch in all contracts. Belvidere elementary teachers have 30 minute lunches, while high school teachers have 40 minute lunch periods, further delineated into three days per week duty-free and two days per week with 25 minutes duty-free and 15 minutes student help. In Great Meadows, teachers are guaranteed a 30 minute duty-free lunch, while Harmony teachers enjoy 20 minutes. The Hope CBA says teachers get one lunch period daily, but language around the length of times says “15 minutes less than what was previously offered,” with the extra 15 minutes used for the “educational necessities of the district.” The Hope CBA does not specifically state the number of minutes. Finally, the White CBA is silent on the subject of teacher lunch periods, except to say that the teacher day shall be 6 hours 30 minutes inclusive of lunch.

Teacher preparation time provides teachers with time to prepare lessons, meet with colleagues or parents, or grade student work among other professional tasks. Great Meadows teachers at the middle school level receive five preparation periods per week plus an additional five common planning periods per week. Elementary teachers receive six preparation periods per 5 day cycle. In Belvidere, elementary teachers receive one preparation period per day while high school teachers receive four preparation periods over a 4-day cycle. Harmony teachers are entitled to 40 minutes per day (200 minutes per week), while Hope teachers receive 44 minutes per day and White teachers receive 210 minutes per week or 42 minutes per day.

Teachers who forfeit non-student contact time (preparation period or lunch period) to cover classes for colleagues are paid between \$20 and \$37.50 per coverage, with Hope teachers receiving their hourly rate.

Extra service for activities such as overtime, student supervisory duties, faculty meetings, field trip chaperoning, etc. are unique to each contract. Most of the contracts include between one and two faculty meetings per month, though Belvidere is capped at 30 meetings per year with a maximum of four meetings in a single month.

Salaries

Important employee safeguards were placed into P.L.2021, c.402. It provides that “the tenure and seniority rights of all employees ... except for superintendents ... shall be recognized and preserved”; “... all periods of employment in any of the school districts shall count toward

acquisition of tenure and seniority”; and that “... All statutory and contractual rights to accumulated sick leave, leave of absence, and pension of an employee that have been acquired through employment in any of the districts shall be recognized ...”¹²⁴

TABLE 140
Salary Guides

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Horizontal Steps	5	7	5	6	6
Vertical Steps ¹²⁵	19	18	17	18	15
Salary - Step 1 BA	\$51,119	\$54,359	\$56,508	\$56,890	\$59,020
Salary - Step 10 MA	\$64,629	\$71,189	\$70,413	\$75,850	\$74,185
Salary - MA Top of Guide	\$90,489	\$87,094	\$86,638	\$89,530	\$85,285
Longevity Provisions ¹²⁶	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

Table 140 shows some divergence in salary levels that would require attention to bring the guides into alignment. Notably, starting salaries at BA Step 1 range from just over \$51,119 in Belvidere to \$59,020 in Great Meadows, a difference of about \$7,900. On the opposite end of the guide at the MA Top of Guide, the greatest difference drops to about \$5,200 with Belvidere offering the highest salary at \$90,489 and Great Meadows offering the lowest at \$85,285.

Leaves of Absence

Leaves of absence are generally in line with each other and fairly standard among other school district agreements. While some of the benefits described below are tiered, the parameters outlined are the most recent benefits offered to newly hired employees. For example, a 10-month employee in Belvidere gets 12 sick days if hired before July 1, 2021; that number drops to 10 sick days if hired on or after July 1, 2021.

¹²⁴ N.J.S.A. 18A:13-47.10

¹²⁵ Except for Belvidere, the other districts have several combined vertical steps

¹²⁶ Starting at Year 15 in Hope and Year 19 in Great Meadows

TABLE 141
Leaves of Absence

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Employee Illness Days ¹²⁷	10 days	10 days	1 day/mo worked	12 days	10 days
Family Illness Days	3 days/yr immediate family, non-cumulative	2 days/yr cumulative	n/a	2 days/yr, use or pay out \$37.50/day	1 day/yr non- cumulative
Personal Business Days	3 days/yr, unused accumulate to sick	4, max 2 unused accumulate to sick, not used to extend vac/holiday	5, unused accumulate to sick	4, non- cumulative, unused paid out at \$37.50/day	3 days/yr, unused accumulate to sick
Bereavement Days	5 family, 3 other family, 1 other relative	5 family, 1 other relative or close friend	5 family, 2 other family, 1 other relative	5 family, 3 other family, 2 grands, 1 other relative	5 family, 3 other family, 1 other relative
Maternity / Paternity Leave	As per law with added flexibility, up to 2 school years after year of birth; return Sept or January	As per law, sick days during disability, 90 days notice, child-rearing leave unpaid and may go 1 year after child is born	As per law, 6 wks notice req, 4 mos notice of anticipated date, child-rearing leave may extend for 24 mos	As per law, child- rearing leave without pay through the balance of school year plus 1 year.	As per law, 60 days notice, use sick days during disability phase, unpaid until end of school year
Sabbatical Leave	Once tenured in district, up to 1 yr half-pay, applies to current position; 1 teacher at a time.	n/a	7 yrs completed in district, unpaid leave, 1 teacher at a time.	n/a	7 yrs completed in district, unpaid up to full yr for graduate study or personal reason; 1 teacher at a time.

As outlined in the table above, there are many distinctions and nuances when it comes to leaves of absence. Employee illness days and bereavement days are fairly consistent, though not identical. There are greater differences when examining family illness days (none to 3), personal days (3 to 5),

¹²⁷ All are cumulative

maternity/paternity leave outside of what is guaranteed by law, and sabbatical leave. Each of these areas will need to be carefully examined and cost out during contract negotiations following any potential regionalization.

Tuition Reimbursements

TABLE 142
Tuition Reimbursements

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Eligibility	After first semester, must apply to current assignment	Hired w/o experience not eligible first yr; 1 course second yr; 2 courses yr 3+; must be related to current role, admin courses not eligible	n/a, courses related to instructional strategies or supt discretion	n/a	Must apply to current position or supervisory position
Credits per Year	9	9	Non-tenured 6, tenured 12	Non-tenured 6, tenured 12	9
Rate per credit	TCNJ rate	\$650	Centenary rate	n/a	Rutgers rate + \$50 texts
Maximum	\$32,500	\$18,000	\$17,500	\$22,000	\$36,000
Commitment	2 yrs	2 yrs	2 yrs	n/a	2 yrs

Each CBA has a tuition reimbursement provision included with provisions surrounding it being fairly consistent with differences centered on eligibility and the number of credits allowed annually. Each district has established a maximum cap that may be expended each fiscal year, with the details surrounding disbursement of those funds fairly consistent (i.e., split evenly fall, spring, and summer sessions). In each CBA, there is a provision for any fractional portion of the amount left unused at the end of the semester to be reallocated to the next semester. The details of how that is done varies from contract to contract.

Insurance Coverages

Insurance coverages tend to be more divergent between school districts, and these districts are no exception. It is sometimes difficult to assess coverage from review of CBA's, though Table 143 provides some comparison based on available data.

TABLE 143
Insurance Coverages

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Medical	Emp must work 25 hrs, SEHBP any plan, NJEHP/GSHP as per law, coverage up to full family, ch 78 rates, Direct10 base copay at \$10/\$10, NJEP \$10/\$15	Emp must work 25 hrs, coverage up to full family, 80% of ch 78 Tier 4, Direct10 base copay at \$10/\$10, NJEHP or GSHP as per law, copay \$10/\$15	Emp must work at least 30 hr/wk, NJSHBP, coverage up to full family, ch 78 Tier 4	Emp must work full-time, coverage up to full family, ch 78 Tier 4, Direct10 base at \$10/\$10, NJEHP or GSHP as per law, copay \$10/\$15.	Emp must work 25 hours, coverage up to full family, SEHPB and NJEHP/GSHP as per law, ch 78 rates, Direct15 base, copay at \$15/\$15
Prescription	\$10B, \$15B mail 90 day \$3G, \$5 mail 90 day	\$10B, \$15B mail 90 day \$3G, \$5 mail 90 days	Full coverage prior to 2005, single coverage after with option to buy up at 50% of difference. \$15B, \$10G, \$15 mail 90 days	SEHBP free-standing plan \$20B, \$10G, \$10 mail 90 day	BOE provides a prepaid prescription plan on a copay basis, no mention of copays
Dental	Full family coverage, \$50 ded	NJ Dental Service Plan II-B	Same coverage as Rx; \$25 ded, capped at \$2,000	Provided without contribution (no details)	Max \$2,500 ded, \$25 annual, \$75 family
Vision	Not listed	Not listed	Not listed	Not listed	VSP Option 1
Coverage Waiver	Lesser of 25% of premium or \$5k	Lesser of 25% of premium or \$5k	Medical: 25% of \$3,000; Dental 25% or \$3,000; Rx 25% or \$3,000	\$2,500 for medical	Lesser of 25% of premium or \$5k
Misc	BOE pays 2 yrs medical if retiring before 55, 1 yr if between 55-60; if retirement eligible, BOE pays 2 yrs per yr	n/a	Each teacher is afforded \$10,000 life insurance if covered under SHBP	Board provides disability income plan at 70% of salary	n/a

Even in the best of circumstances, insurance coverages are nuanced. What appears similar on paper can often be perceived as less than once employees consider the in-network provider list and other

specific details of the plan. It is recommended that any new regional board of education enlist the help of a benefits specialist to assist with the analysis and future negotiations of these plans.

25. Shared Services

Public school contracts law governs all purchasing of goods and services for all public school districts in NJ.¹²⁸ These regulations are very strict and compliance is mandatory. The school business administrator frequently holds a certification as a qualified purchasing agent to address these matters. In very large districts, a separate individual and staff may be responsible for purchasing. Compliance is evaluated regularly through a district's annual audit, grant compliance reviews, and state/federal program audits. NJDOE's Office of Fiscal Accountability and Compliance has general oversight of regulatory programs.

Shared services are permitted by statute, which states, "The boards of education of two or more districts may provide jointly by agreement for the provision and performance of goods and services for their respective districts, or one or more boards of education may provide for such provision or performance of goods or services by joint agreement with the governing body of any municipality or county."¹²⁹ A shared service is defined by code as "any educational or administrative service required to be performed by a district board of education in which the school district, with district board of education approval, is able and willing to share in the costs and benefits of that service with another district board of education, municipality, or other governmental unit, as authorized by the Uniform Shared 12 Services and Consolidation Act at N.J.S.A. 40A:65-1 et seq."¹³⁰ It should be noted that both a send-receive relationship between districts and school choice programs are addressed in other sections of code and statute and are not considered shared services.

Shared services among school districts, local municipalities, and other governmental agencies have long been promoted by the State as a cost savings measure. "Sharing services offers numerous benefits for participating communities. It reduces costs, delivers municipal services in a more efficient manner and increases value for each dollar spent while ensuring local units remain responsible stewards of the public trust."¹³¹

In reality, sometimes that philosophy is true, and sometimes it is not. Purchasing cooperatives save districts hours in pre-purchasing regulation compliance by creating bid documents, soliciting bids, and awarding bids. They also save time and money by eliminating the need for legal review and advertising fees. State purchasing regulations can, however, end up with an inferior product due to a required stipulation of "equal to or better than." This requires careful attention to exactly what has been bid and awarded. Purchasing cooperatives may sometimes find it necessary to substitute a different item due to shortages in availability of the initially awarded item. The item could be better, not as good as, or simply not what was expected.

¹²⁸ N.J.S.A. 18A:18A

¹²⁹ N.J.S.A. 18A:18A-11

¹³⁰ N.J.A.C. 6A:23-1.2

¹³¹ Local Efficiency Achievement Program Guidelines, 2023

Most of the districts in this study participate in some shared services as indicated in the table below. This is consistent throughout the State, as indicated in a 2007 study “Shared Services in School Districts” commissioned by the NJ School Boards Association. While the study may be somewhat dated, the concepts it addresses continue to be promoted throughout the State today.

Shared services between school districts, or between districts and municipalities can save money, generate positive public relations, and foster good relationships. However, what is a good idea conceptually can be difficult to implement, especially if people try to, or need to, assign a financial value, and the end result can be discord among the entities. The process requires flexibility, communication, and typically, trust among the entities.

TABLE 144
Existing Shared Services¹³²

	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Superintendent	Belvidere emp shared with Harmony	Shared with Belvidere			
Business Administrator	Belvidere emp shared with Harmony	Shared with Belvidere	Shared with White	White emp shared with Hope	
Curriculum Coordinator	Harmony employee, stipend shared across existing cluster				
Special Services Director	Belvidere employee shared across existing cluster				
Child Study Team	Belvidere employees shared across existing cluster				
Support Services (e.g., OT,PT)	Belvidere employees shared across existing cluster				
Technology Services	Belvidere emp shared with White			Shared with Belvidere	
Art Teacher	40%	60%			
Spanish Teacher		60%		40%	
Insurance	NJSIG	NJSIG	SAIF	NJSIG	NJSIG
Power, Utilities & Fuel	ACES & HCESC	ACES & HCESC	ACES		ACES & HCESC
Staff Development	Some sharing with sending districts				Joint services with other districts
Transportation Abstracts, Bids, Quotes & Jointures				WCSSSD, SCESC	MCESC, HCESC, ESCNJ

¹³² Data gathered from business administrators and NJDOE User-Friendly Budgets

Food Service			Food from White, served by district employee	FSMC, Food prepped & delivered to Hope by district driver	
Facilities & Fields	Facilities shared with town		Facilities shared with town	Facilities shared with recreation teams	Town uses school fields
Custodial, Maintenance, and Trash Services/Equipment	Shared with the town whenever possible			Town uses school mower	Provide licensed tech for oil tanks to municipalities
Snow Removal		Shared with town	Shared with town		

It is obvious that the Belvidere Cluster has worked hard to establish money saving and efficiency enhancing shared services with an array of shared personnel. For instance, the Belvidere superintendent also serves in the same role for Harmony. The state allows \$15,000 to be added to the salary for a superintendent who takes on the responsibility for a second district.¹³³ For budgetary purposes the salary is allocated by time spent in Belvidere (60%) and Harmony (40%).

The Belvidere business office provides all services for Harmony at a cost of \$96,000, \$42,000 of which is added to the business administrator’s salary. Similarly, Hope pays White half of the salary (\$66,853) to provide business office functions.

The Belvidere Cluster shares child study team services, and also support services, including occupational, physical therapy and behavioral therapies. Technology support is provided to White by a Belvidere employee at a cost of \$25,000. A need for services was expressed by both Harmony and Hope, but a method to share the already maximized resource does not appear to be viable at this time.

Great Meadows is a more independent district, and the consultants were not able to identify significant shared services.

While some people might assume this sharing of personnel makes sense given the size of a district or geographical proximity, there are other factors to consider. Unlike a regionalized district with one board of education, the superintendent and business administrator in a shared personnel relationship are the administrators of two separate school districts. This means that, in most cases, they contend with issues like two different sets of collective bargaining agreements and budgets, twice as many evening meetings, and twice as many compliance activities. This requires a strong commitment on the part of the shared employees, and can be a stressful factor that may contribute to frequent turnover or burnout.

¹³³ N.J.S.A. 18A:17-24.3

This cluster of districts has had some administrative turnover in recent years. While there has been consistency in the Belvidere and Harmony shared administration, the shared business administrator in Hope and White has been there only since January 2024 and the prior one was there one year. There is currently a one day a week interim superintendent at Hope. Great Meadows recently promoted a principal to the position of business administrator. Turnover of administrative personnel, especially in small districts where one or two people are performing many different roles, creates multiple opportunities for errors and missed deadlines. Simply put, a one- or two-person office restricts the development of systems of checks and balances or internal controls, through no fault of those in the office. The lack of continuity of personnel in certain positions in the district can create a situation where the staff are always catching up and would rarely allow time for exploring greater effectiveness and money saving opportunities.

Potential Shared Services

With extensive shared services already in place, finding additional ones will prove challenging if the districts remain in their status quo governance arrangements. One idea would be to create a single, well staffed, regional administrative office, where the following operations could be centralized:

- Audit
- Payroll
- Transportation
- Purchasing
- Entitlement funds, competitive grant writing, grant administration
- Software licenses
- Food service management
- Facilities management
- Compliance reports
- Budget preparation
- School treasuries

A regional pk-12 business office could not only handle these required business functions, but also allow time to explore grants, alternative funding, purchasing co-operatives, and other money saving options. In small districts, one or two people are expected to be an expert in all areas. While this may occur sometimes, it is very difficult to meet all state deadlines and handle day-to-day problems as well. The expertise of individuals in a particular area could be strengthened and should eventually save the district time and money.

Similarly, the centralized administrative and educational reports are done by many different individuals, where a single office could have individuals who become more experienced in, and familiar with, processing the reports. Some examples are:

- Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC)
- School Safety Data System (SSDS)
- Standards Measurement and Resource for Teaching (NJSMART)

- Application for State School Aid (ASSA)
- Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR)
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Accountability Report
- Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)
- Open Public Records Act (OPRA) Requests
- Fall Enrollment Report
- Certified and Non-Certified Staff Reports
- School Performance Reports
- State Budget Submission

Beyond a joint administrative office, other possible areas for exploration include:

- Directors - While a special services director is shared by the Belvidere Cluster, it was suggested in superintendent interviews that a single facilities director could be another useful shared employee. A regional transportation coordinator (a position that does not currently exist) could find efficiencies in an area where costs are growing dramatically.
- Special Subject Teachers - Art, music and world language teachers are becoming increasingly difficult to find and hire into part-time positions. Sharing the services of full-time teachers may increase the likelihood that these teachers are attracted to and stay in the districts as well as providing continuity within the program.
- Counselors - The availability of counselors is more important now than ever. Smaller schools often struggle to employ full-time counselors. Acting as a region, some counseling positions may be shared across schools, reducing the financial burden on one district while offering continuity of services within the region.
- Special Education - The districts each offer multiple in-district special education programs. Depending on the number of students in any given year, efficiencies may be found in consolidating one or more of these programs into one or even two of the elementary schools.
- Food Services - Facility capacity for food services could be investigated to see if it would be more efficient to consolidate that activity in one district under a single food service management company with the other districts becoming satellite locations.
- Staff Development - It is difficult for small districts to afford the cost of either sending out staff or bringing in meaningful professional development programs. Selecting a common goal and sharing that cost would assist all districts. Another frequent technique is sending a staff member for training and then asking that person to cross train other staff, a win-win as it reinforces the staff member's training at the same time.

While there are opportunities for additional shared services, it is important to remember that these personnel are asked to serve two or more districts. The districts may have different workplace cultures, norms, and work rules, which can impact the success of the shared service arrangements. Fully regionalized school districts can realize all of the benefits mentioned above while

simultaneously reducing duplication of efforts in many areas of operation and provide staff with time for program development, research, innovation, and cost savings.

26. Contracted Services

Transportation Services

Transportation in NJ school districts has many facets to it. One that is commonly discussed is the issue of courtesy busing. Districts are required to transport any grades K-8 child if they live two miles or more from the school, or grades 9-12 students if they live two and a half miles or more from the school.¹³⁴ Eligibility is calculated by measuring the shortest route from the home to the school. Even though a district is not required to provide transportation for students living within these limits, it is typical for students to be bused for other reasons, such as hazardous walking routes, out-of-district students, and special education students with transportation needs.

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (without Great Meadows)

A primary difference between send-receive districts and a regional district is that the regional district is responsible for transporting students attending the regional schools, while sending districts are responsible for transporting their students to the receiving district. As a small town with a pk-12 district, Belvidere does not transport any students except for those going to the technical school. Harmony, Hope, and White are responsible for their own pK-8 student transportation needs as well as their grades 9-12 students going to Belvidere HS. The proposed regionalization (absent a combined middle school) would result in little to no change as far as what schools the students attend, so there would likely be no change to any of the current transportation programs. Tables 145 to 148 provide current and projected transportation data for the Belvidere Cluster.

TABLE 145
Transportation Data, Grades 5-12, Belvidere¹³⁵

	2023-24 Actual	2024-25 Actual	2025-26 Projected
Enrolled 9-12	106	172	134
Transported 9-12	0	0	0
Contracted Routes 9-12	0	0	0
Route Costs 9-12	\$0	\$0	\$0
Enrolled 5-8	120	113	70
Transported 5-8	0	0	0
Contracted Routes 5-8	0	0	0
Route Costs 5-8	\$0	\$0	\$0

¹³⁴ N.J.S.A. 18A: 39.1

¹³⁵ Data gathered from business administrators; grades 5-8 are listed as this is how transportation routes are bid

TABLE 146
Transportation Data, Grades 5-12, White

	2023-24 Actual	2024-25 Actual	2025-26 Projected
Enrolled 9-12	91	92	98
Transported 9-12	91	92	98
Contracted Routes 9-12	4	4	–
Route Costs 9-12	–	\$208,072	\$214,314
Enrolled 5-8	98	101	74
Transported 5-8	98	101	74
Contracted Routes 5-8	6	6	–
Route Costs 5-8	–	\$175,631	\$180,900 ¹³⁶

TABLE 147
Transportation Data, Grades 5-12, Hope

	2023-24 Actual	2024-25 Actual	2025-26 Projected
Enrolled 9-12	44	40	41
Transported 9-12	44	44	41
Contracted Routes 9-12	2	2	2
Route Costs 9-12	–	\$106,033	\$109,214
Enrolled 5-8	55	53	44
Transported 5-8	55	53	44
Contracted Routes 5-8	2	2	2
Route Costs 5-8	–	\$64,139	\$66,063

TABLE 148
Transportation Data, Grades 5-12, Harmony

	2023-24 Actual	2024-25 Actual	2025-26 Projected
Enrolled 9-12	74	60	63
Transported 9-12	74	60	63
Contracted Routes 9-12	3	3	–
Route Costs 9-12	–	\$144,897	\$149,244
Enrolled 5-8	89	88	70
Transported 5-8	89	88	70
Contracted Routes 5-8	5	5	–
Route Costs 5-8	–	\$184,812	\$190,356

¹³⁶ 2025-26 costs based on 3%, but would depend on state consumer price index

Grades pK-12 All Purpose Regional Option (with Great Meadows)

First, the current situation for grades 9-12 students attending Hackettstown HS is compared to the costs for them to attend Belvidere HS. Middle school data were not reviewed for Great Meadows, because it is presumed those students would continue to attend school where they are.

TABLE 149
Transportation Analysis, Grades 5-12, Great Meadows¹³⁷

	2023-24 Actual	2024-25 Actual	2025-26 Projected
Enrolled 9-12	304	303	296
Transported 9-12	273	281	280
Contracted Routes 9-12	–	5	–
Route Costs 9-12	–	\$382,500	\$393,975

Current bus routes and stops from Great Meadows to Hackettstown HS were evaluated to find:

- The distance from the furthest point of Great Meadows school boundaries to Hackettstown HS is approximately 10.9 miles. The average route time for the current bus routes into Hackettstown HS is approximately 62.8 minutes.
- The distance from the furthest point of the Great Meadows school boundaries to Belvidere HS is approximately 17.1 miles, an additional 6.2 miles.
- There are many group bus stops located at intersections throughout the district. These bus stops are located in places that are safe for picking up and dropping off students. Numerous bus stops located at student home addresses were noted. While making bus stops at a student home address adds time to a bus route, making these stops are often the safest for these students.

Based on the information above, buses from Great Meadows to Belvidere HS can be established without major changes. However, the following should be noted:

- The additional mileage would add approximately 10 minutes to the bus routes. The bell schedule for Hackettstown HS is 7:50 am to 2:48 pm. If the bell schedule for Belvidere HS remains 8:00 am to 2:20 pm, the additional time would not have student pickup times starting any earlier than they currently do, as the additional time would be covered by the 10-minute difference in start times.
- The current contracts that Great Meadows has for transportation to Hackettstown HS cannot be renewed as is, since the destination will be changed.¹³⁸
- The current cost of those bus routes is \$76,500 each. Should they stay at Hackettstown HS and renew, the cost is projected to increase by \$2,295 up to \$78,795. This is based on a 3%

¹³⁷ Data gathered from business administrators

¹³⁸ N.J.S.A. 6A:27-9.13

increase, but that cost could be more than or less than based on what the state posted consumer price index will be for the 2024-25 school year.

- While the current bus stops may be used, bus routes to Belvidere HS from Great Meadows would need to be bid.¹³⁹ Based on a survey of current single-tier bus routes with similar miles and route times, the cost of \$78,795 per route should be budgeted.
- To get the best contract cost, it is highly recommended that the new routes are out for bid no later than the end of March 2025.
- Additional cost savings can be realized if the Great Meadows district bids the busing in house rather than through a service commission. This would avoid service commission administrative costs.

Existing bus stops could be utilized through a newly formed district with its own transportation coordinator. The addition of a single transportation coordinator would provide for a regular evaluation of bus stops, routes, and tiering to enhance and improve busing efficiency. A new all-purpose district might also want to consider purchasing some of its own vehicles and hiring at least some of its own drivers to mitigate having all transportation in the hands of an external contractor.

Having studied and looked at the grades 9-12 picture, another scenario being studied is to have Great Meadows MS host a combined middle school program as part of the district joining with the Belvidere Cluster in an all-purpose regional school district. However, transportation would need to be studied in a more in-depth manner. Certainly, new routes would have to be created and bid out. Absent bidding exact routes, it would be nearly impossible to make any reasonable cost estimates. Post-pandemic school transportation fees have increased dramatically and remain highly unpredictable.

TABLE 150
Mileage from Study Elementary Schools to Potential Middle School Sites

	White ES	Belvidere HS/ES	Great Meadows MS
Belvidere ES	2.9	0.0	11.3
White ES	0.0	2.9	8.5
Harmony ES	9.2	7.6	17.7
Hope ES	6.7	9.5	6.2
Central ES	8.5	11.3	0.0
TOTAL	27.3	31.3	43.7

¹³⁹ N.J.S.A. 6A:27:9.2

Table 150 considers differences in mileage between potential middle school sites to make a rough estimate of the cost differences. Using the distances between this study group's elementary schools and three potential middle school sites shows a total of 27.3 one-way miles from the elementary schools to White ES, 31.3 to the Belvidere site, and 43.7 to Great Meadows MS. Choosing Great Meadows MS would be an approximate increase of 60% in mileage over White and 40% over Belvidere, which can serve as rough estimates of transportation cost increases.

Grades 6-8 Combined Middle School Option

The specific scenario here is one in which either Belvidere or White houses a combined grades 6-8 middle school program, which would require the other three schools to transport their students. This analysis includes cost estimates on the existing routes from White, Hope, and Harmony to Belvidere HS to include grades 6-8 students in addition to the grades 9-12 students already transported. If housed at White, the estimated cost of new routes are from White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere to White ES.

TABLE 151
Transportation Cost Analysis, Belvidere Cluster

	Belvidere	White	Harmony	Hope	TOTAL
Current 9-12 Cost	\$0	\$208,072	\$144,897	\$106,033	\$459,002
Estimated 9-12 Cost 2025-26	\$0	\$214,314	\$149,243	\$109,213	\$472,770
Current 5-8 Cost	\$0	\$175,631	\$184,812	\$64,139	\$424,582
Estimated 5-8 Cost 2025-26	\$0	\$180,899	\$190,356	\$66,063	\$437,318
Added Cost if Belvidere MS	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Added Cost if White MS	\$80,000	\$80,000 ¹⁴⁰	\$80,000	\$40,000	\$280,000

As noted in Table 151, the cost to the districts to have the middle school program located at Belvidere HS/ES is likely \$0, because the districts are already transporting their grades 9-12 students there and assumes a comparable bell schedule. Table 152 breaks down the number of students that would need to be transported to a grades 6-12 campus. The middle school students could be added to the 54 passenger buses that are currently contracted at little to no additional cost. Some routes may need to be adjusted and rebid to accommodate additional, or at least different, bus stops. However, the increased cost is projected to be less than an additional route.

¹⁴⁰ Costs could be avoided if middle students can be added to elementary routes.

TABLE 152
Projected Student Transportation Counts, 2025-26

	White	Harmony	Hope
Current Buses to/from Belvidere HS	4	3	2
Grade 9-12 Students Transported	98	63	41
Grade 9-12 Students per Route	25	21	21
Grades 6-8 Students Transported	74	70	44
Total Grades 6-12 Students	172	133	85
Grades 6-12 Students per Route	43	45	43

Housing the middle school program in White ES is estimated to cost an additional \$280,000 in transportation. The cost is based on a study of current contractor pricing in similar school districts with an average single route cost being approximately \$40,000 per route. It is important to note that these costs are estimates. Establishing new routes would require following the state required bidding process.¹⁴¹ It is possible that the single route cost could exceed \$40,000, or that the cost could come in lower than the numbers presented, but it is our opinion they will not. There could be a slight savings in the cost of transporting middle school students to White should the program be housed at White ES. The savings would come if the students could be added to the six elementary routes and would be dependent on bell times for the middle school program.

From a transportation perspective, the recommendation is to locate the middle school program at the Belvidere HS/ES site for the following reasons:

- The current bell times for both Belvidere HS (8:00 am to 2:30 pm) and Belvidere ES (8:00 am to 2:20pm) work best for transportation.
- Bus tiering. The current bell schedule for each elementary school is: Hope ES (8:55 am to 3:15 pm), White ES (9:00 am to 3:15 pm), and Harmony ES (8:40 am to 3:20 pm)
- Belvidere HS and ES being located on the same campus lends itself to a positive in the daily morning dropping off and afternoon picking up of students.
- Middle school students from Hope, White, and Harmony would be added onto the existing high school routes, which would add no significant additional transportation cost for the middle school students, other than the cost of contract renewals.

There could be additional savings if there were the ability to double tier busing. Double tiering allows a bus to do a high school/middle school route and then an elementary school route in both

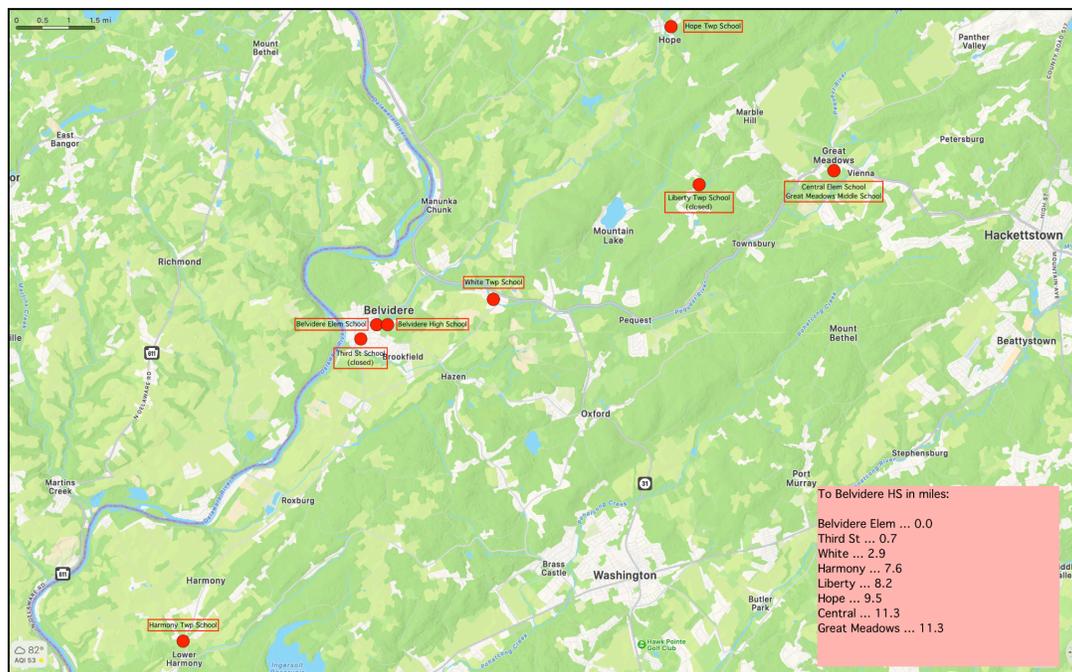
¹⁴¹ N.J.S.A. 6A:27-9

morning and afternoon. Several bell schedule scenarios were run, and the best bell times that would allow double tiering would be: high school/middle school from 7:50 am to 2:25 pm with drop off by 7:45 am; and elementary school from 9:05 am to 3:35 pm. The obstacle in tiering is the distance from the furthest most part of each township to the Belvidere site. This distance plus the density of traffic during rush hour is a concern.

The use of vocational school buses for double tiering was investigated with the following student counts: Belvidere 10; Hope 11 (plus 2 at Morris Tech); White 28; and Harmony 19. The bell schedule for Warren Tech is 8:02 am to 2:55 pm, times that do not suggest a double tier setup.

Grades pK-8's with Closing Belvidere HS Option

FIGURE 2
School Locations and Distances to Belvidere HS¹⁴²



An important issue when considering forming a new send-receive relationship is whether there is a significant difference in distances for students to travel to and from new receiving high schools. Table 153 shows the average one way commute from cluster elementary schools in Warren County to and from their currently designated high schools. Commutes from each elementary school in this study to the nearest high school are shown in Table 154 with shaded cells for the shortest mileages. For Harmony students in grades 9-12, a commute to and from Phillipsburg HS would not only be below the county average of 5.8 miles, but nearly half of the current commute to Belvidere HS. Hope students could see a slight reduction from the current 9.5 miles to and from Belvidere HS to 7.4 miles to and from North Warren Regional HS. White and Belvidere high schoolers would

¹⁴² Map created and distances calculated using Google Maps

clearly see increased travel mileages to 6.7 and 7.6 miles, respectively, to and from Warren Hills Regional HS, though these are similar to commutes in other clusters. Only Great Meadows students would see a significant increase in travel mileage, if their school district was to join in a new regional relationship. Staying at Hackettstown HS seems prudent from a travel perspective.

TABLE 153
Distances from Elementary Schools to Warren County High Schools

Elementary/Middle Schools	Warren County High Schools				
	Belvidere	Hackettstown	North Warren	Phillipsburg	Warren Hills
Harmony	7.6				
Hope	9.5				
White	2.9				
Allamuchy		8.0			
Great Meadows		5.3			
Blairstown			2.7		
Frelinghuysen			7.6		
Knowlton			10.0		
Alpha				5.6	
Bloomsbury				7.5	
Greenwich				6.5	
Lopatcong				2.4	
Pohatcong				6.2	
Franklin					5.3
Mansfield					5.6
Oxford					3.8
Washington Boro					1.5
Washington Twp					2.9
AVERAGE ¹⁴³	6.0	6.7	6.8	5.6	3.8

¹⁴³ The county average for the five high school clusters is 5.8 miles

TABLE 154
Distances from Study Elementary Schools to Warren County High Schools¹⁴⁴

Elementary & Middle Schools	Warren County High Schools				
	Belvidere	Hackettstown	North Warren	Phillipsburg	Warren Hills
Belvidere	0.0	16.4	13.1	12.0	7.6
White	2.9	13.6	13.3	13.6	6.7
Harmony	7.6	22.6	20.5	4.4	11.1
Hope	9.5	11.2	7.4	20.2	12.8
Great Meadows	11.3	5.3	13.3	22.0	12.3

Food Services

NJ school districts have the option to participate in many state and federal food service programs. Decisions as to which programs a district will select are frequently determined by the percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Districts that have over 5% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch must participate in the National School Lunch Program. The United States Department of Agriculture’s Food and Nutrition Services had a significant change in the Community Eligibility Program this past year, and many more districts across the nation will be eligible to participate. The program has many benefits for students, families, and districts, but eligible districts need to carefully evaluate the financial implications on the operation of their food service program. Further enhancements to this program may make it more appealing if proposed changes to calculation factors are adopted in the federal budget. The demographics of the districts in this study will be evaluated to determine if they are eligible for the program. It should be noted that the program requires a school or district to have a 25% identified student percentage. This is different from a 25% free/reduced lunch percentage in that the calculation is based upon directly certified students (i.e., those receiving Medicaid, TANF, SNAP), not the school lunch income verification application with which most are familiar.

Districts with a higher number of economically disadvantaged students usually provide at least breakfast and lunch, and sometimes after school snack, dinner and/or a summer food program. Wealthier districts may choose to offer lunch and/or breakfast on their own, so as not to have to comply with the myriad regulations of the federal programs. However, NJ legislation requires that every school with more than 10% low-income students must provide a breakfast program.¹⁴⁵ The act also expanded the eligibility criteria so that more students are eligible. A more recent law expanded

¹⁴⁴ Distances calculated using Google Maps

¹⁴⁵ Working Class Families’ Anti Hunger Act, A2368 (2022)

the eligibility criteria to up to 224% of the federal poverty level as of September 2024.¹⁴⁶ Districts will be reimbursed by the state for the cost difference between students who are not federally eligible for free/reduced price meals, but are eligible under the more generous state standards.

The level of students eligible for free/reduced meals is a major factor in the financial stability of many food service programs, as the reimbursement rates are different depending on whether the student is a private payer or qualifies for the state or federal program. For instance, NJ Department of Agriculture Form 163 shows that for the 2022-23 school year, a district with less than 60% free/reduced population will receive the following reimbursements:

Free Lunch	4.40 (4.33 federal and .07 state)
Reduced Lunch	4.00 (3.93 federal and .07 state)
Paid Lunch	0.83 (0.77 federal and .06 state)

The covid pandemic brought with it a major change to food service programs with the advent of free breakfast and lunch for all students in public schools. Although there are many advocates of continuing the universal free meals due to the links between nutrition and learning, the program expired in September 2022.

Accounting for food service operation is similar to a business in private industry and is labeled an enterprise fund. Many years ago schools hired their own employees to provide lunch. In recent years most districts turned this operation over to a food service management company. These companies are selected through a process that is strictly regulated by the NJ Department of Agriculture. Each company prepares a proposal that includes staffing, sample menus, projected and/or guaranteed financial results, and other items that have been deemed important to the district. It is not unusual for a small district to have their food as a satellite operation from a larger district, where the food is prepared at one site and transported in special containers to another site.

TABLE 155
Meal Costs, 2023-24¹⁴⁷

	Breakfast Regular / Reduced or Free	Lunch Regular / Reduced or Free
Belvidere	2.15/.00	ES 3.65, HS 4.15/.00
Harmony	2.25/.00	3.65/.00
Hope	Not served	3.75/.50/.00
White	2.25/.50/.00	3.75/.50/.00
Great Meadows	3.00/.00	3.60/.00

¹⁴⁶ A5684/S4055 (2024)

¹⁴⁷ Data gathered from district websites and business administrators

TABLE 156
Food Service Management Company Guarantees¹⁴⁸

	2022-23	2023-24
Belvidere	No loss	No loss
Harmony	No guarantee	No guarantee
Hope	No guarantee, district lost 26k and FSMC lost 24k	No food service program, consolidated with White to provide lunch
White	2,400	No guarantee
Great Meadows	Break even	Break even

Many districts had very successful financial reports post-pandemic, a consequence of the extra reimbursement funds that were made available to districts in order to encourage free breakfast and lunch for all students during the pandemic. Every district in the study has Maschio’s Food Services as their food service management company (FSMC). However, each district is running their program in a slightly different manner.

The districts in the Belvidere Cluster are finding it difficult to sustain financially successful programs. The table above demonstrating the no loss or no guarantee illustrates that. The FSMC is a business and will work with districts, but they cannot sustain losses year after year. Belvidere and Great Meadows still have guarantees ensuring that they will not have a loss in the food service program. Food service in Hope was a shared service with White for FY 22 and FY 23. Hope budgeted a loss of \$26,000 in 22-23 and lost even more than that; according to the BA, the FSMC also incurred a substantial loss. Great Meadows had more than three months average expenditures in their June 30, 2023 audit, so their program is quite stable.

The Hope food service has been consolidated into White’s program; all receipts and expenses are through White. Hope ES is treated as an additional White site for food service purposes. A part-time teacher at Hope is paid a stipend to pick up food from White in the morning on his way to Hope and a 2 hour per day employee serves the food. All revenues and expenses are through White.

Belvidere has more of a traditional food service program. The operation is facilitated by the facility design of a shared kitchen between the two schools. Harmony and Great Meadows are also traditional programs.

A review of the free/reduced student population as presented in the Demography domain of this study shows a low of 10.4% at Hope and a high of 27.7% at Belvidere for the 2023-24 school year. Since this includes both applications and not just those students who are directly certified, none of

¹⁴⁸ Data gathered from business administrators

the districts in this study qualify at this time for the Community Eligible Program. Furthermore, the combined districts would not qualify if regionalized unless eligibility requirements are changed.

All districts currently exceed the 10% free/reduced requirement to provide breakfast, and all districts except Hope do currently provide a breakfast program; Hope will start in the 2024-25 school year. Whether or not regionalization occurs, it would be worth the districts exploring sharing a food service management company and, specifically, a director of food services. There should also be some potential savings due to economies of scale in purchasing and/or personnel.

Overall, a pK-12 regionalization might benefit the food service program. Centralization of services and similar menus should enable economies of scale for purchasing, facilities and flexibility of staffing. Again, the districts all use the same FMSC. Although it appears that there is centralized management for each district at Maschio's, the districts do not have a director on site. There is a food service worker who is also the manager/head person in the kitchen.

27. Tuition

As stated earlier in the study, Belvidere is a pk-12 school district serving students in grades 9-12 from the sending districts of pK-8 districts Harmony, Hope, and White. Great Meadows Regional, a pK-8 comprising Liberty and Independence Townships, is not part of the current Belvidere cluster and currently sends its grades 9-12 students to Hackettstown on a tuition basis.

Districts that participate in send-receive relationships often do so because the sending district is not large enough to provide a thorough and efficient education to a particular age group or classification of students. In some cases, a district may maintain a pK-6 or pK-8 school but send its 7-12 or 9-12 students to another high school. In others, the small district (including non-operating districts) may choose to send all of its students to another elementary school and then to a centralized high school. There are many possible configurations.

The send-receive structure can also be used for special education students, where a particular need cannot be addressed in the student's home district. A detailed financial analysis of special education tuition is not conducted in this report due to the variable nature of special education needs and populations. The tuition calculations do follow the same process as for regular education students. As stated previously in the Education & Program domain of this study, there are opportunities for shared services of personnel for the provision of special education programs.

One thing that is similar in all send-receive relationships is the financial arrangement, though it should be noted that some districts deviate slightly from this process. Sending districts are to provide the receiving district an estimate of their anticipated enrollment for the next school year by December 15th. The process is simple up to that point, but often confusing to both lay people and many school officials from there forward. Following the determination of estimated enrollment from the sending district, most districts receive a certified tuition cost from the State for two years prior in January and use that to set an anticipated tuition rate so that districts can begin the budget

process. The “real” estimated tuition rate is determined by most districts when the second NJDOE state budget download is received, and it calculates the maximum estimated tuition that can be charged.

There are a few ways in which both sending and receiving districts can address financial concerns during the budget process. One is to over or underestimate the projected enrollment. Another is through the negotiation of the proposed tuition rate. Districts are provided a tuition rate in the state budget software that cannot be exceeded; however, they may charge the sending district a lower rate. As will be described below, both methods can result in large amounts due to or from the other district later on in the process. Once the districts have agreed upon the estimated number of students and an estimated tuition, the next part of the calculation begins.

After a district’s financial records are audited, they receive a certified tuition amount from the State for each group of grade levels for the school year that took place before the current school year. They also receive a certified average daily enrollment for the same year. To do an adjusted tuition calculation, the actual average daily enrollment is multiplied by the actual tuition to determine how much should have been paid versus what was paid. This amount is added or subtracted to the sending district's future budget in order to adjust estimated tuition to actual tuition.

For example:

By December 15th of the 2022-23 school year, the sending district sends an estimated number of students for the 2023-24 school year.

In January 2023, the receiving district establishes a tentative tuition rate for the 2023-24 school year, so that all districts can work on their budgets for that school year.

Later in January or early February, the receiving district should receive the certified tuition rate for 2021-22 based upon the district’s audit and actual enrollment numbers. These actual numbers are compared to the estimated numbers for 2021-22 to come up with the actual tuition that should have been paid. Depending on the proposed versus actual, either district can end up owing money to the other. The projected numbers from January 2021 for 2021-22 are reconciled to actual post-audit numbers two years later in January 2023 for 2023-24.

When the state budget download occurs, a district can determine from the software what the maximum allowed estimated tuition is. The districts may still choose to use a lower amount, but should be careful in doing so as reducing it too much can cause problems in the future year reconciliation process.

The receiving district combines the projected numbers for 2023-24 and the actual amount that should have been paid for 2021-22 to come up with a total tuition due for the 2023-24 budget and a tuition contract is developed. The same process is used for each classification of special education programs.

Send-receive relationships can be very sensitive for a variety of reasons and financial concerns can certainly be a cause of contention. Occasionally, there are situations that call for the districts to cooperatively develop solutions that allow both parties in the send-receive relationship to deal with unusual circumstances. A common example of this is when one district has budgetary problems. The typical resolution is a board approved written agreement between the two entities, generally with the knowledge and/or consent of the NJDOE county office.

As stated above, this study has four send-receive relationships for educating grades 9-12 students. The districts of Harmony, Hope and White each have an agreement with Belvidere, and Great Meadows sends its students to Hackettstown HS.

As stated earlier, one of the areas to be investigated as part of this study is to evaluate Great Meadows withdrawing from its current send-receive relationship with Hackettstown. The receiving districts of Belvidere and Hackettstown generally follow the traditional send-receive tuition procedures. These two districts are both more flexible than some others as far as working with sending districts to determine estimated rates and enrollments, and also receipt of payment. All parties appear to recognize that regardless of how estimated tuitions and enrollments are set, the reconciliation process is based on the state certified tuition and actual average daily enrollment.

In the event that all districts in the study go forward with a pK-12 regionalization, one of the issues to be resolved would be the two years of tuition reconciliations. The reconciliation process explained above converts estimated tuition and enrollment to actual numbers two fiscal years later. Although there may be other options, the consultants see two possibilities: (a) the new regional absorbs the reconciliation; or (b) the tax levy is adjusted for the first two years as a final reconciliation for the municipalities involved.

TABLE 157
Tuition Rate History, Belvidere, Grades 9-12¹⁴⁹

Year	Certified Tuition	\$ Difference	% Change
2018-19	15,396	-	-
2019-20	15,786	390	2.53%
2020-21	16,966	1,180	7.47%
2021-22	17,084	118	0.70%
2022-23	18,532	1,448	8.48%

¹⁴⁹ Data provided by district staff and NJDOE Homeroom

TABLE 158
Tuition History, Harmony to Belvidere, Grades 9-12

Year	Certified Tuition	Regular Ed ADE	Total Tuition
2018-19	15,396	90.6	1,394,878
2019-20	15,786	84.2	1,329,181
2020-21	16,966	78.4	1,330,134
2021-22	17,084	75.9	1,296,676
2022-23	18,532	74.6	1,382,487

TABLE 159
Tuition History, Hope to Belvidere, Grades 9-12

Year	Certified Tuition	Regular Ed ADE	Total Tuition
2018-19	15,396	55.0	846,780
2019-20	15,786	43.0	678,798
2020-21	16,966	46.6	790,616
2021-22	17,084	41.3	705,569
2022-23	18,532	49.3	913,628

TABLE 160
Tuition History, White to Belvidere, Grades 9-12

Year	Certified Tuition	Regular Ed ADE	Total Tuition
2018-19	15,396	125.8	1,936,817
2019-20	15,786	124.8	1,970,093
2020-21	16,966	116.4	1,974,842
2021-22	17,084	119.5	2,041,538
2022-23	18,532	107.7	1,995,896

TABLE 161
Tuition Rate History, Hackettstown, Grades 9-12

Year	Certified Tuition	\$ Difference	% Change
2018-19	14,325	-	-
2019-20	14,099	-226	-1.58%
2020-21	13,667	-432	-3.06%
2021-22	15,408	1,741	12.74%
2022-23	16,257	849	5.51%

TABLE 162
Tuition History, Great Meadows to Hackettstown, Grades 9-12

Year	Certified Tuition	Regular Ed ADE	Total Tuition
2018-19	14,325	320.2	4,587,295
2019-20	14,099	301.3	4,248,170
2020-21	13,667	294.0	4,017,825
2021-22	15,408	269.6	4,153,997
2022-23	16,257	279.0	4,535,053

The Belvidere Cluster and Hackettstown-Great Meadows send-receive relationships all operate with annual financial contracts utilizing the form required by the State. None of the districts have an overarching multi-year send-receive contract describing terms and conditions. While some districts do find that an overarching agreement provides guidelines for issues when they arise, lack of such an agreement is not unusual.

According to the Belvidere business administrator, the only requested adjustment to the amount due/method of payment has been that if a district ends the year with funds available, they are allowed to make a payment for the future year tuition adjustment. This allows the sending district to expense the money and Belvidere defers the revenue to the year they have it budgeted for. Hackettstown has not had any issues with or adjustments for Great Meadows.

Grades 6-8 Send-Receive Middle School Option (without Great Meadows)

As stated earlier in the study, this option is being envisioned with the revision of the existing send-receive agreements, or the development of new ones, as opposed to the creation of an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district. The reason is that the former is much more easily accomplished than the latter. That said, similar opportunities and challenges of a combined send-receive middle school program would be present if an all-purpose school district decided to combine its middle school students at one site as well.

If the Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White districts chose to create a combined middle school experience for all students in grades 6-8 at the Belvidere HS/ES site, the existing send-receive agreements with Belvidere could be expanded to include those middle school students in addition to the grades 9 through 12 students. If students in grades 6-8 attend one of the other pK-8 districts, new send-receive agreements could be written.

One issue that may surprise many people is that a middle school tuition cost per pupil is not typically very different from a high school student. In fact, the data from both Hackettstown and Belvidere (available for FY 22 and FY 23, both show a grades 6-8 certified tuition rate that is higher than either district's high school tuition rate. Hackettstown's rate is 9% lower than Belvidere's in the first year and 3% lower in the second year. This could be due to any combination of the factors that make up a tuition rate (enrollment, staffing, salary guides, educational program, special services, etc.). Beyond that, however, the tuition estimates below are based on estimates and assumptions, and facts that are important for the reader to know:

- Certified per pupil tuition costs are different from costs per pupil used in the Taxpayer Guide to Educational Spending and must be requested from the individual districts;
- The addition or deletion of a significant number of students from any grade level will change the per pupil tuition costs; the smaller the class size, the larger the impact;
- The average daily enrollments are those used for calculating state aid and tax projections;
- Although Belvidere tuition data was collected for the last 5 years, the consultants determined it would not be a true representation of current costs to average that data to establish a cost;
- These calculations do take into account the demographic enrollment changes, but not the potential changes in calculations that would be caused by the increase in enrollment to an existing program;
- The average tuition rate for the years for FY 22 and FY 23, \$17,462, were increased at a rate of 2% for each succeeding year;
- Tuition rates are issued to a district regardless of whether they are in a formal send-receive relationship or not, as these numbers are used for other tuition purposes as well; and
- A pK-12 regionalization would share all costs for all programs across all constituent districts; tuition would not be an issue within the regionalized municipalities.

TABLE 163
Projected Average Daily Enrollment, Belvidere Cluster, Grades 6-8¹⁵⁰

Year	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	ADE Total
2024-25	93.3	64.1	46.7	88.0	292.1
2025-26	76.4	65.6	48.4	81.6	272.0
2026-27	73.2	65.7	47.8	89.1	275.8
2027-28	73.4	71.9	52.4	91.4	289.1
2028-29	78.1	73.1	54.3	94.6	300.1

TABLE 164
Projected Tuition Cost, Belvidere Cluster, Grades 6-8

Year	Estimated Tuition Cost Per Pupil	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White
2024-25	18,167	1,694,981	1,164,505	848,399	1,598,696
2025-26	18,530	1,415,718	1,215,590	896,868	1,512,076
2026-27	18,901	1,383,549	1,241,792	903,465	1,684,074
2027-28	19,279	1,415,076	1,386,158	1,010,218	1,762,097
2028-29	19,664	1,535,758	1,437,438	1,067,755	1,860,214

The table above shows tuition rates to be paid by each of the four districts in the current cluster. The purpose is to provide an idea of what each district might need to estimate for grades 6-8 tuition if their district does not host the program. In reality if a district does host the program, the cost for the resident students is built into that district's budget but affects the tuition rate for all students.

A key question remains: what are the financial implications of expanding send-receive agreements to grades 6-12? From a macro perspective, there should be a comparable tradeoff between the increase in numbers of students for whom tuition will be paid versus the decrease in personnel and other resources for students who will no longer be educated there. This is addressed in a general way by a model combined middle school program proposed in the Cost Savings section earlier in this domain. However, if the districts choose to pursue this option, they will need to devote sufficient time and resources to more intensive scrutiny of each aspect of such a decision.

A consideration, especially for Harmony and Hope, is that if their grades 6-8 students are sent to Belvidere, it will leave their schools with student enrollments of approximately 125 and 90, respectively. Since small districts struggle with balancing revenues and spending efficiently given lower economies of scale, reducing school enrollments may exacerbate this issue.

¹⁵⁰ Using same ADE with methodology explained in state aid calculations

Grades pK-8 Districts with Closing Belvidere HS Option (without Great Meadows)

It is impossible to accurately project possible receiving high school tuition absent extensive examination of those potential receiving districts, which is beyond the scope of this study. If one assumes similar tuition rates among the districts, Harmony, Hope, and White would pay largely what they currently pay Belvidere to another receiving high school district. Belvidere's situation is complicated by having a similar need to pay tuition to a receiving high school district, which is not currently the case, while losing the tuition revenue from the current cluster. That should be offset largely by cost reductions of educational resources currently allocated.

28. Reserves

NJ allows many different types of reserve accounts, each of which is legally restricted for specific purposes, and in some cases, has a cap for the dollar amount that may be reserved. Although some reserve accounts require deposits to be specified during budget preparation, other reserves are allowed to be identified at the end of the fiscal year in June, utilizing unspent appropriations or unanticipated revenues. The district audit reviews the reserve accounts to ensure that they do not exceed legal restrictions. The districts in this study use five types of reserve accounts, and only those will be described below.

Maintenance reserve accounts are the most common. This account balance cannot, at any time, exceed 4% of the replacement cost of the school district's school facilities for the current year.¹⁵¹

Most districts have a capital reserve account, and state statute and code provide the restrictions on it.¹⁵² Deposits are generally transferred by board resolution at year end, but may also be appropriated in the budget planning process. Expenses must be incorporated into the certified budget or approved by voters as a separate proposal. The amount in the reserve is capped at the local share of project costs in the district's approved long range facility plan.

Tuition reserve accounts are restricted to districts in a send-receive relationship and cannot be used for special education tuition.¹⁵³ The purpose is to budget for tuition adjustments based upon tuition rates and attendance certified by the state compared to the originally budgeted amount. They are capped at up to 10% of the estimated tuition cost. Deposits to this type of account are usually a year-end calculation based upon available funds and anticipated tuition adjustments.

Districts may choose to fund their unemployment obligation in one of two ways. When using the benefit reimbursement method versus state contributions, standard practice is to use an unemployment reserve account.

¹⁵¹ N.J.A.C. 6A:26A, N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-41

¹⁵² N.J.S.A. 7F-41, N.J.S.A. 18A 7G-31, N.J.S.A. 18A:21-2, N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-14.1

¹⁵³ N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-17.1

As many districts face the challenges of reduced or, at best, stable state aid and have more restricted budgets, the establishment of an emergency reserve to address future unanticipated general fund expenses is becoming more common.¹⁵⁴

TABLE 165
Reserve Accounts as of June 30, 2023¹⁵⁵

Reserve	Belvidere	Harmony	Hope	White	Great Meadows
Capital	468,344	118,925	776,147	1,442,124	3,450,697
Tuition	-	-	130,000	352,000	750,000
Maintenance	602,308	238,465	239,447	260,872	834,068
Unemployment	-	208,039	52,604	-	-
Emergency	-	-	167,251	68,793	250,000
TOTAL	1,070,652	565,429	1,365,449	2,123,789	5,284,765

According to the Hope business administrator, the status of reserves has changed significantly since the June 30, 2023 ACFR. With NJDOE approval, it was necessary to use a withdrawal from maintenance reserve to be able to finish the 2023-24 school year, with an additional \$99,165 also withdrawn for the 2024-25 school year. Finally, \$50,000 of tuition reserve was used in 2023-24, and the remaining \$80,000 was budgeted for 24-25.

29. Facility Utilization

This section of the report models the projected use of available instructional space in each school building across the five-year enrollment projection. It is a high-level evaluation for the purpose of analyzing available instructional space in each of the schools, so it does not examine infrastructure such as roofs, heating systems, electrical needs, etc. The data used for this analysis came from a review of the most recent long-range facility plans, which provide detailed information describing capacity generating instructional space in each school such as classroom numbers, classroom sizes, classroom use, and extracurricular and non-instructional spaces. Enrollment projections in this analysis are based on the Demography domain earlier in this document rather than the ADE's used for state aid projections and tuitions in this section.

Tables 166 through 170 provide grade level projections for each school building:¹⁵⁶

- The number of general education and special education (self-contained) classrooms needed for each grade level for each projected year. Full sized classrooms are those with at least 650

¹⁵⁴ N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-41, PL 2007, c62

¹⁵⁵ Annual Comprehensive Financial Report, 2023

¹⁵⁶ NJDOE Long Range Facility Plans

square feet of space. While there have been changes over the years in size requirements for new classrooms, this does not apply to older buildings; therefore, the minimum used in this study is 650 square feet;

- The projected average class size for each grade level. While maximum class sizes may be designated by district policy, we used state guidelines for this study. These guidelines are 21 students in grades K-3, 23 in grades 4-5, and 24 in grades 6-12. A maximum of 12 was used for self-contained special education;
- For pK students, the state maximum of 15 students was used and all schools in this study have full day programs; and
- A summary of specialized instructional spaces labeled “Sp” for art, music, computers, physical education, etc.

TABLE 166
Projected Room Utilization, Hope ES

	pK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	SC	Sp	Rooms Used	Rooms Available	Rooms Net
Students 2024-25	18	12	18	12	17	14	13	12	15	10	5				
Full Sized Rooms	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	16	17	1
Avg Class Size	9	12	18	12	17	14	13	12	15	10					
Students 2025-26	11	20	14	18	12	18	12	13	12	16	6				
Full Sized Rooms	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	15	17	2
Avg Class Size	11	20	14	18	12	18	12	13	12	16					
Students 2026-27	18	12	24	14	18	13	16	12	13	13	6				
Full Sized Rooms	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	17	17	0
Avg Class Size	9	12	12	14	18	13	16	12	13	13					
Students 2027-28	20	20	14	23	15	20	12	16	12	14	7				
Full Sized Rooms	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	17	17	0
Avg Class Size	10	20	14	12	15	20	12	16	12	14					
Students 2028-29	16	15	24	14	25	16	17	12	16	13	7				
Full Sized Rooms	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	17	17	0
Avg Class Size	8	15	24	14	13	16	17	12	16	13					

TABLE 167
Projected Room Utilization, Harmony ES

	pK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	SC	Sp	Rooms Used	Rooms Available	Rooms Net
Students 2024-25	14	25	11	17	16	14	19	22	31	16	1				
Full Sized Rooms	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	7	20	28	8
Avg Class Size	14	13	11	17	16	14	19	22	16	16					
Students 2025-26	23	22	24	10	18	15	14	19	22	29	2				
Full Sized Rooms	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	7	22	28	6
Avg Class Size	12	11	12	10	18	15	14	19	22	15					
Students 2026-27	25	36	21	23	11	18	16	14	20	21	1				
Full Sized Rooms	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	22	28	6
Avg Class Size	13	18	11	12	11	18	16	14	20	21					
Students 2027-28	23	40	35	20	24	10	18	15	14	18	1				
Full Sized Rooms	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	22	28	6
Avg Class Size	12	20	18	20	12	10	18	15	14	18					
Students 2028-29	16	27	38	33	21	24	11	18	16	13	1				
Full Sized Rooms	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	7	23	28	5
Avg Class Size	8	14	19	17	21	12	11	18	16	13					

TABLE 168
Projected Room Utilization, White ES

	pK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	SC	Sp	Rooms Used	Rooms Available	Rooms Net
Students 2024-25	12	38	30	31	30	22	20	25	21	27	0				
Full Sized Rooms	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	0	5	21	27	6
Avg Class Size	12	19	15	16	15	22	20	13	21	14					
Students 2025-26	27	18	36	31	31	29	21	21	26	21	0				
Full Sized Rooms	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	0	5	20	27	7
Avg Class Size	27	18	19	16	16	15	21	21	13	21					
Students 2026-27	22	40	17	37	31	30	28	22	22	27	0				
Full Sized Rooms	1	3	1	2	2	3	2	1	1	1	0	5	22	27	5
Avg Class Size	22	14	17	19	16	10	14	22	22	27	0				
Students 2027-28	21	33	38	18	37	29	29	29	23	23	0				
Full Sized Rooms	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	0	5	21	27	6
Avg Class Size	21	17	19	18	19	15	15	15	23	23					
Students 2028-29	21	32	32	40	17	36	28	30	30	24	0				
Full Sized Rooms	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	0	5	22	27	5
Avg Class Size	21	16	16	20	17	18	14	15	15	24					

TABLE 169
Projected Room Utilization, Belvidere ES

	pK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	SC	Sp	Rooms Used	Rooms Available	Rooms Net
Students 2024-25	42	26	17	18	18	22	17	26	30	40	7				
Full Sized Rooms	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	19	14	-5
Avg Class Size	14	13	17	18	18	22	17	13	15	20					
Students 2025-26	42	17	27	17	17	18	24	18	28	30	6				
Full Sized Rooms	3	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	2	19	14	-5
Avg Class Size	14	17	14	17	17	18	12	18	14	15					
Students 2026-27	42	14	18	28	17	18	19	26	20	28	6				
Full Sized Rooms	3	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	18	14	-4
Avg Class Size	14	14	18	14	17	18	19	13	20	14					
Students 2027-28	48	22	15	19	27	17	19	21	27	20	6				
Full Sized Rooms	4	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	19	14	-5
Avg Class Size	12	11	15	19	14	17	19	21	14	20					
Students 2028-29	48	19	23	15	18	28	19	20	22	28	6				
Full Sized Rooms	4	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	18	14	-4
Avg Class Size	12	19	12	15	18	14	19	20	22	28					

TABLE 170
Projected Room Utilization, Belvidere HS

	9	10	11	12	SC	Sp	Rooms Used	Rooms Available	Rooms Net
Students 2024-25	78	66	82	64	3				
Full Sized Rooms	4	3	4	3	1	12	27	40	13
Avg Class Size	20	23	21	22					
Students 2025-26	112	80	65	66	3				
Full Sized Rooms	5	4	3	3	1	12	28	40	12
Avg Class Size	23	20	22	22					
Students 2026-27	84	114	78	52	3				
Full Sized Rooms	4	5	4	3	1	12	29	40	11
Avg Class Size	22	23	20	18					
Students 2027-28	77	86	112	63	3				
Full Sized Rooms	4	4	5	3	1	12	29	40	11
Avg Class Size	20	22	23	21					
Students 2028-29	55	79	84	90	3				
Full Sized Rooms	3	4	4	4	1	12	28	40	12
Avg Class Size	19	20	21	23					

The classroom availability data demonstrates that the Belvidere Cluster schools have a wide variety in terms of physical capacities. An all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district would have greater flexibility to assign students and grade levels as needed to more effectively and efficiently use available classroom spaces.

Hope ES is the smallest of the schools in terms of space and enrollment with sufficient classrooms for their projected student enrollment and not much more. In the next couple of years, there is an additional classroom or two for modest program growth, but that disappears in 2026-27 and beyond.

Despite initial thoughts about Harmony ES, this analysis showed that housing the cluster's grades 7-8 students is closer than it may have appeared. With a possible addition of as many as 143 students from the other three schools and given a standard class size of 24, there would be a need for 6 classrooms. Harmony ES has the capacity in the first four projected years but not in 2028-29. Core facilities could be another issue, as the all-purpose room is small by modern standards and may not be best suited for a combined middle school program.

Belvidere ES is currently overcapacity and projected to remain so over the next five years. Initially, this would be surprising given the dramatic reduction in student enrollment over the past twenty years as previously noted. However, the district chose to close one of its two elementary schools in 2019, thus eliminating the availability of those classrooms. Given the board of education's intention to sell the Third Street School building, the only opportunity for Belvidere ES to regain classroom space would be the creation of a unified middle school program somewhere else.

White ES is showing a projected availability of 5-7 classrooms over the next five years. With a possible addition of as many as 142 grades 7-8 students from the other three schools and given a standard class size of 24, there would be a need for 6 classrooms. White is projected to have at least 6 classrooms in only three of the next five years.

With anywhere from a projected 11 to 13 classrooms available over the next five years, Belvidere HS is the only school in the current cluster with sufficient capacity to consider housing an expanded send-receive middle school program. The grades 6-8 option would require 8 additional classrooms at 24 per classroom to house as many as 182 additional students from White, Harmony, and Hope. Freeing up all grades 6-8 rooms in Belvidere ES as well would require 12 classrooms in Belvidere HS. One possibility could be to unify grade 6 in Belvidere ES, and move all grades 7-8 students to Belvidere HS. Considering the educational advantages of combining grades 6-12 on one campus in one way or another, a middle school program at Belvidere HS/ES should be strongly considered, whether through expanded send-receive agreements or an all-purpose regional school district.

If an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district becomes a reality, Belvidere HS would not have sufficient classroom space to house all grades 6-8 students, including those from Great Meadows, but could do so for grades 7-8.

Great Meadows would have the capacity to house a regional grades 6-8 middle school at Great Meadows MS. This would require the district to reopen Liberty Township School, which closed to

school operations at the end of the 2018-19 school year but has been maintained. The district is currently embarking on grant-funded projects to get Liberty Township School ready for students once there is a reason to open it.¹⁵⁷

Grades pK-8's with Closing Belvidere HS Option

The facilities issue in this scenario would involve evaluating the capacities of the various Warren County high schools that could potentially receive students from the Belvidere Cluster. This would have involved investigations of those school districts' long range facility plans that are beyond the scope of this study. It is important to point out that the North Warren Regional and Phillipsburg School Districts participate in the NJ Interdistrict School Choice Program and thus are actively seeking additional students. Hackettstown HS would not change in this scenario as the school is already educating Great Meadows' high school students, leaving Warren Hills Regional School District as the lone unknown.

Expanding Preschool

Another opportunity given the facilities analysis above is to consider expansion of the preschool programs at the schools with capacity. Great Meadows has a realistic pK universe of 126 children and a projected pK enrollment in 2024-25 of 23 students in two classrooms. Work is underway at Liberty Township School to make five classrooms preschool compliant, so that school and/or Central ES may be able to serve its entire pK universe and, based on preschool enrollment, perhaps house grades K, 1, and/or 2 as well.

The realistic pK universe for the Belvidere Cluster is approximately 135 children, and serving that population would require as many as 10 total classrooms. The four elementary schools have a projected pK enrollment of 86 students in 7 classrooms in 2024-25. With 15 projected classrooms available in 2024-25 (Hope 1, White, 6, and Harmony 8), these districts could meet their entire universe of pK students, especially given the appropriate state funding to do so. Given the room availability at Belvidere HS, Belvidere could shift grades 7-8 students there, potentially opening classrooms for preschool expansion at all the elementary schools.

An all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district also would be able to consider consolidating preschool programs into one central location in a newly built or leased space that could accommodate a greater percentage of potential pK students. This would also free up existing classrooms for expanding other elementary and secondary programs.

¹⁵⁷ Information from the Great Meadows superintendent

30. Financial and Operational Impact

The consultants performed a comprehensive review and analysis of historical state aid, tax levies, property values, incomes, district budgets, audits, enrollments, and other financial records, in order to analyze district operations, project future values and estimate the financial impact of regionalizing for each participating district and municipality.

For purposes of this financial analysis, only the regionalization scenarios both with and without Great Meadows require analysis of state aid or tax apportionment for several reasons. First, state aid is not impacted by the reorganization of the middle school program nor the closing of Belvidere HS. In both circumstances, state aid would continue to be provided for all K-12 resident students of each separate school district and varying tuition payments would be exchanged between districts in the cluster.

Second, tax apportionment is not necessary unless a regional school district is created. While there may be tax levy implications to both the reorganization of the middle school program and the closing of Belvidere HS, neither scenario requires a change in how the tax to be levied in each community is calculated.

The projections and analyses presented here are based on current data, trends, and assumptions. Actual outcomes may vary based on future economic conditions, policy decisions, and other factors that could impact school funding and operations. As such, this report should serve as a guide for informed decision-making, with the understanding that ongoing monitoring and potential adjustments may be necessary if the regionalization process moves forward.

State aid calculations for both scenarios are based on the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) formula, which has been fully funded as of the 2024-25 school year. In both regionalization scenarios studied, state aid for the regional school district is projected to be lower than the state aid that would be provided to the constituent districts if they remain separate. By 2029, the disparity between state aid in a regional district and the status quo (separate districts) grows to \$3.1 million in the “all potential constituents” scenario and \$1.3 million in the “current cluster only” scenario. While recent legislative changes (i.e., P.L. 2021, c.402) provide some protection against the estimated reductions in aid, the provision cannot fully offset the impact of combined property wealth on the calculation of equalization aid in the state’s SFRA funding formula, absent a true hold harmless provision being considered by state leaders.

Two primary methods for apportionment of a regional district’s costs are permitted under state law — allocation based on equalized valuations, which distributes costs according to each municipality’s property wealth, and allocation based on student enrollment, which assigns costs in proportion to each community’s utilization of the district’s services.

Equalized valuations across all municipalities are expected to remain consistent with secular trends over the past 25 years showing cyclical peaks and declines. In all communities, valuations reached

highs in 2010, bottomed around 2017, trended sideways and up through 2022, and have been rising steadily through the present. Equalized valuations are forecast to continue rising in each district until sometime between 2026 and 2028 before beginning to decline for a number of years.

Significant disparities exist between property wealth and enrollment shares of each individual district. Opposing patterns of benefit are present where some districts in the cluster benefit more from apportionment ratios that weight equalized valuations heavier and other districts benefiting more from apportionment ratios that weight enrollments heavier. These opposing patterns require careful consideration of various apportionment ratios to identify an optimal ratio that provides the most benefit to all communities.

For the "all potential constituents" scenario, the model identified an optimal ratio of 43% equalized valuation to 57% enrollment. In the "current cluster only" scenario, an optimal ratio of 45% equalized / 55% enrollment was identified. However, while optimal in that each ratio allocates the tax levy equitably to all communities, there is no combination of standard apportionment parameters that produces universal tax benefits to all communities in either regionalization configuration. Belvidere and Harmony stand to experience increased costs in a regional district relative to the status quo while Hope and White would see savings. If Great Meadows is included, both Independence and Liberty would experience relative tax increases.

Both regionalization scenarios project modest financial benefits through cost savings. The "all potential constituents" scenario generates gross cost savings of \$558,000 annually, while the "current cluster only" scenario projects savings of \$178,000. These savings would primarily come from consolidating administrative functions and reducing duplicative services across the current constituent districts. Despite these cost savings, the consultants intend for all existing programs to be maintained. The actual implementation and allocation of any cost reductions would ultimately be determined by the board of education of the regional school district, ensuring that decisions about resource allocation will be made with consideration of the regional district's specific needs and priorities in mind.

Despite these potential savings, the amount falls far short of the cost savings that would be necessary to provide universal tax benefits to all communities under the allowed methods. The consultants estimate that \$2.7 million in cost savings would need to be present.

Additionally, the cost savings detailed in the study represent *potential* tax savings, as the actual impact on future tax levies in each municipality will depend on decisions made by the future board of education of the regional school district. The board will need to balance potential tax relief against the educational programming needs of the district.

Budgetary costs per student were examined comparing district spending priorities and efficiency to their peers across the state. An item worth noting is that Harmony (9.6%), White (9.9%), and Great Meadows (10.0%) are below the state median percentage (10.4%) in administrative spending, and Hope (10.9%) is close to the state median. This is likely due to the number of positions with multiple responsibilities in each district, confirming previous analysis in this study. Lower spending

on administration is often identified by the public as an area to realize potential efficiencies in education.

In terms of total budgetary costs per student, it must be noted that the state median of \$19,900 is for all K-8s – small, medium, and large. Great Meadows (\$18,500) is below the state median, while Harmony (\$25,816), White (\$23,493), and Hope (\$22,672) are all well above it. It is very difficult for any K-8 district with a small student enrollment to be efficient financially. As stated earlier, consolidating into a combined middle school program would be more effective educationally but could result in some greater inefficiencies given the even smaller pK-5 enrollments.

It is clear that all four districts prioritize direct spending on students in terms of the percentage of dollars allocated to classroom instruction. Harmony at 63.4% of its budget and White at 62.2% are exceptional in this regard, and Hope (58.1%) and Great Meadows (57.7%) are keeping pace with the state median (58.0%).

As a small K-12 district, Belvidere suffers from the same efficiency issues as its small K-8 sending districts. Its total budgetary per student cost (\$20,224) is 8% higher than the state median for all K-12s of \$18,727. However, Belvidere is at the state median percentage in classroom instruction. It is among the highest in its peer group and more than double the state median percentage in extracurriculars. Combining these two spending categories shows how much Belvidere prioritizes spending on direct student programming.

The review of the main collective bargaining agreements in Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, Great Meadows and White school districts provides a comparison of key aspects to help with potential negotiations if the districts decide to regionalize fully. The agreements have similar expiration dates (4 expired in 2024, Hope's in 2025). Recognition clauses are diverse and range from Belvidere's very inclusive agreement to Great Meadows recognizing only certificated staff. All districts have binding arbitration. There are slight differences in negotiations, grievance procedures, and association rights and privileges. The length of the school year ranges from 183 days to 185 and length of day varies from 6 hours and 30 minutes to 7 hours and 10 minutes. All contracts mention duty free lunch. There is a large variance in starting salaries and other topics would need coordination in a combined agreement.

Current law allows for the existing contracts to expire and then be renegotiated by the new all purpose regionalized board of education. As is the case in most districts, significant effort will need to be focused on the salary and insurance issues to achieve a collective bargaining agreement for a fully regionalized district. A relatively new law signed into law in July 2023,¹⁵⁸ may make negotiations relative to paid time off easier to negotiate. The law expands the state-mandated 10 sick days per year to be used for other than employee only illness. Until this law was signed into effect, the law only allowed employees to use sick days for their own illness; family illness, death in family, etc., were all separately negotiated as part of the collective bargaining agreement.

¹⁵⁸ P.L.2023, c.95.

Shared services are permitted by statute and are promoted by the state as a cost saving measure, although their effectiveness can vary. The districts in the Belvidere Cluster participate in many shared services, including purchasing cooperatives, insurance, non-public funds administration services, and transportation. Great Meadows is a more independent district; consultants were not able to identify significant shared services.

It is not unusual for it to be difficult to find administrators for small districts. Creative boards find solutions such as sharing with another district or having an administrator serve in roles that would otherwise require additional personnel. The Belvidere Cluster shares district-level personnel already. The superintendent for Belvidere is also the superintendent for Harmony and Hope currently has a one day a week interim. Belvidere performs all business functions for Harmony, and White does the same for Hope. The special services director is shared among the four districts.

As financial concerns continue to grow, another option discussed throughout the study is the introduction of additional shared services between the districts within the region. There is little doubt that the expansion of shared services would benefit the students of the region by increasing the continuity and alignment of educational services. However, because these suggestions for additional shared services may be accepted in whole or in part and between a few or all districts involved in the region, it is difficult to quantify estimated cost savings and the distribution of those costs across districts. It is important to note that increasing shared services would not be an issue if regionalization occurs.

Shared administrative personnel does lead to increased workload and potential turnover or burnout. The time that the administrators spend duplicating planning and administrative duties (e.g., budgets, audits, board meetings, professional development, compliance activities) could be reduced significantly in a consolidated district. This would free up time that could be used to further benefit student achievement, focus on cost efficiencies, and achieve other district goals that simply cannot be addressed under the current time constraints.

These districts are unusual in that none of the current Belvidere Cluster have any bonded debt. The consultants have confirmed with the school business administrators that no debt was issued subsequent to the June 30, 2023 ACFR. Great Meadows, however, does have debt; although the existing debt will be retired in 2025, the district is looking at an \$8.1M project that would replace it. Unless there are negotiated changes, as permitted by law, any debt would become debt of the new regional if Great Meadows was part of it.

In terms of transportation for the all purpose scenario without Great Meadows, the proposed regionalization would result in little to no change as far as what schools the students attend, so there would likely be little to no change to any of the current transportation programs. For the fuller regional scenario, buses from Great Meadows to Belvidere HS can be established without major changes though there would be some considerations to be addressed. Under the combined middle school approach, the recommendation is to locate the middle school program at the Belvidere HS/ES site for multiple reasons, not least of which is that middle school students from Hope, White, and

Harmony could be added onto the existing high school routes which would add no additional transportation cost for the middle school students, other than the cost of contract renewals.

The districts all use the same food service management company and offer varying levels of breakfast and lunch services. At 27.7%, Belvidere has the highest percentage of students eligible for free and reduced meals and Hope, at 10.4% has the lowest, though Hope will start serving breakfast next year. The study suggests that, apart from savings due to economies of scale in purchasing or personnel, meal programs would not be significantly impacted by a pK-12 regionalization. The kitchen facilities were not studied, but it seems that there could be an opportunity for increasing diversity of offerings and potential satellite sites within the Belvidere Cluster. White is already doing this for Hope on a very small scale.

Some of the districts in the current Belvidere cluster are finding it difficult to sustain financially successful food service programs. Evidence of this is recent significant losses in Hope, to the point that their program is now blended with White. Only Belvidere and Great Meadows still have a guarantee from the food service management company, and that is a no loss or breakeven guarantee. Great Meadows had more than three months of average expenditures in their June 30, 2023 audit, indicating a high level of stability in their program.

Regarding the education of grade 9-12 students, each pK-8 sends students to either Belvidere or Hackettstown. The send-receive relationships operate with annual financial contracts. There are no overarching multi-year agreements governing issues other than finance, and there are no major issues with any of the send-receive tuitions at this time. The tuition section briefly discusses special education tuition and suggests that a regionalization could allow for the creation or enhancement of special education programs across the districts, potentially leading to significant resource savings.

There are financial implications of expanding current grades 9-12 send-receive agreements to include grades 6-8. From a macro perspective, there should be a comparable tradeoff between the increase in numbers of students for whom tuition will be paid versus the decrease in personnel and other resources for students who will no longer be educated at the district of residence. Belvidere would experience a similar situation in a reverse direction (i.e., higher tuition revenues that largely offset higher personnel costs). A consideration, especially for Harmony and Hope, is that if their grades 6-8 students are sent to Belvidere, it will leave their schools with student enrollments of approximately 125 and 90, respectively. Since small districts struggle with balancing revenues and spending efficiently given lower economies of scale, reducing school enrollments may exacerbate this issue.

The State allows school districts to maintain various reserve accounts, each with specific legal restrictions and purposes. The districts in this study utilize five types of reserve accounts: capital; tuition; maintenance; unemployment; and emergency. Capital reserve accounts are restricted to the local share of project costs in the district's long range facility plan, while tuition reserve accounts are capped at 10% of the estimated tuition cost and are used by districts in send-receive relationships to budget for tuition adjustments. Maintenance reserve account balances cannot exceed 4% of the

current year's replacement cost of the district's school facilities. Emergency reserve accounts to address future unanticipated general fund expenses are becoming more common.

As of June 30, 2023, the participating districts have varying balances in these reserve accounts, with Great Meadows and White having the highest balances in capital reserves. Great Meadows and Belvidere have significantly higher maintenance reserves than the other districts. Both White and Hope had tuition reserve accounts as of the June 30, 2023 audit; however, according to the Hope administration, that has been depleted for the current year budget.

The classroom availability data demonstrates that the Belvidere Cluster schools have a wide variety in terms of physical capacities. An all-purpose regional school district would have greater flexibility to assign students and grade levels as needed to more effectively and efficiently use available classroom spaces.

With anywhere from a projected 11 to 13 classrooms available over the next five years, Belvidere HS is the only school in the current cluster with sufficient capacity to consider housing an expanded send-receive middle school program. One possibility could be to unify grade 6 in Belvidere ES, and move all grades 7-8 students to Belvidere HS. Considering the educational advantages of combining grades 6-12 on one campus in one way or another, an expanded send-receive middle school at Belvidere HS should be strongly considered, especially if an all-purpose regional school district is not.

If an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district becomes a reality, Belvidere HS would not have sufficient classroom space to house all grades 6-8 students, including those from Great Meadows, but could do so for grades 7-8. Great Meadows would have the capacity to house a regional grades 6-8 middle school at Great Meadows MS. This would require the district to reopen Liberty Township School, which closed to school operations at the end of the 2018-19 school year but has been maintained.

The facilities issue in the closing Belvidere HS scenario would involve evaluating the capacities of the various Warren County high schools that could potentially receive students from the Belvidere Cluster. This would have involved investigations of those school districts' long range facility plans that are beyond the scope of this study.

Another opportunity given the facilities analysis above is to consider expansion of the preschool programs at the schools with capacity. An all-purpose regional school district also would be able to consider consolidating preschool programs into one central location in a newly built or leased space that could accommodate a greater percentage of potential pK students. This would also free up existing classrooms for expanding other elementary and secondary programs.

FINDINGS and RECOMMENDATIONS

This feasibility study considered perspectives from governance and law, demography, education and program, and finance and operations. After analysis of the data gathered in each of these domains, the consultants have produced the following findings and urge the boards of education of the Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, White, and Great Meadows school districts to consider the recommendations offered below. Note: Any referendum or vote to regionalize that does not include the options as designed for this study would completely change the analysis and findings produced herein.

According to this study, an all purpose regionalization of the five participating districts, or a consolidation of just the Belvidere Cluster districts, would provide multiple opportunities for a more effective and efficient educational program. While there are expected to be cost savings and potential operational benefits, the investigation provided evidence that either consolidation scenario would be somewhat less beneficial from a tax apportionment perspective than the status quo, although this could be moderated using the ten-year transitional apportionment method. The state aid analysis led to uncertain conclusions about its impact on a new regional district that will need to be addressed either through State administrative interpretation or legislative amendment to the current law. At best, this would produce a “hold harmless” impact on state aid. Therefore, the consultants **recommend that consideration of an all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district either with or without Great Meadows be postponed until the aforementioned state aid issue is either clarified or amended.**

The consultants **recommend that the boards of education strongly consider further investigation of a combined grades 6-8 middle school program for the Belvidere Cluster districts at the Belvidere HS/ES site.** The educational benefits of such a program have been identified in many places in this report. There would be no impact from a tax levy or state aid perspective, and a projected cost decrease from the tradeoff of each district’s reduction in personnel and instructional resources dedicated to those students versus additional tuition from Harmony, Hope, and White to send their grades 6-8 students to Belvidere. A consideration, especially for Harmony and Hope, is that if their grades 6-8 students are sent to Belvidere, it will leave their schools with student enrollments of approximately 125 and 90, respectively. Since small districts struggle with balancing revenues and spending efficiently given lower economies of scale, reducing school enrollments may exacerbate this issue.

Based on the analysis herein, the consultants **do not recommend the closing of Belvidere High School at this time.** Evidence was provided on the rich pride and traditions of the school community as well as the strong curricular, extracurricular, and support programs provided by the district. While the concern about small enrollment remains, the demographic projections identify an upward trend in high school student numbers over the next several years. Cost savings would not be expected as new high school tuition for Belvidere’s grades 9-12 students would likely wipe out any salary and benefit savings from downsizing high school staff.

The recommendations that follow pertain to each domain of the study and can be referenced in context at the page numbers noted.

Governance and Law

1. The law requires that the proposal to form a regional district be submitted to the voters in each of the municipalities that choose to participate in the referendum. The proposal to create a new regional district would be adopted if a majority of the votes cast in each of the local districts agreed to form the regional district. Conversely, if voters in any one of the communities participating in a referendum voted against creating a new regional district, the proposal would fail. Including Great Meadows in the proposal for a new pK-12 regional district is more complicated, since it is already a pK-8 regional district serving the communities of Independence and Liberty Townships with its students in grades 9-12 currently attending Hackettstown HS under a send-receive relationship. (p. 25)
2. If the current Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White districts chose to create a combined middle school experience for all students in grades 6-8, the existing send-receive agreements with Belvidere could be expanded to include those middle school students in addition to the grades 9-12 students. These would be decisions to be considered and made by each board of education and would not be subject to a public referendum, though the board decisions would need Commissioner approval. (p. 26)
3. Already a pK-8 regional, Great Meadows could enter into a send-receive relationship with Belvidere for its students in grades 6-8 while continuing its send-receive relationship with Hackettstown for grades 9 through 12. Another possibility would be for Great Meadows to host the combined middle school program for its own students and those from the Belvidere Cluster. As a result of obstacles identified, the option for Great Meadows to send middle school students to the Belvidere Cluster or receive them from the Cluster will not be primary considerations in the remainder of this study. (p. 26-27)
4. There may be valid reasons to consider closing Belvidere HS because of declining enrollments. However, this option presents multiple layers of complication, particularly since it would require each community to find a place to send its high school students and have those receiving districts have the space and be willing to accept additional students. It would also not advance the benefits that would come from a unified pK-12 educational program; in fact, it could even be educationally detrimental to ninth grade students entering different high schools throughout the county. (p. 27)
5. A new regional school district without Great Meadows would have four constituent municipalities and a nine member board of education (i.e., 4 from White, 2 from Belvidere, 2 from Harmony, 1 from Hope). A proposed regional district with Great Meadows would have six constituent municipalities and also a nine member board (i.e., 2 from Independence, 2 from White, 2 from Liberty, 1 from Belvidere, 1 from Harmony, 1 from Hope). (p. 28-29)

6. The results of the Belvidere HS student survey do not point to any one elementary district being demonstrably better than the others in preparing their students for the academic rigors of high school. Each district seems to have its own subject areas of strength. The outcome of importance is that the diversity of preparation does not lead to all students being equally ready in all subject areas. Greater coordination in a regionalized district or a joint middle school program would provide all students with a more common experience. (p. 34)
7. Members of the Belvidere-Harmony-Hope-White-Great Meadows Steering Committee met periodically with the study team to provide oversight and guidance, coordinate interviews and data collection, and ensure that information was shared with the leadership of all districts on an ongoing basis. The Committee intends to serve as a forum for district representatives to discuss critical interim planning decisions affecting the districts leading up to any potential regionalization vote or any decision to explore additional shared services. (p. 46)
8. Approval by the various boards of education would be needed to move forward with an application to the state Commissioner of Education for approval to hold a referendum to combine the districts into one all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district. (p. 46)
9. Discussion among district leadership and boards of education, followed by the development and approval of specific contracts, would be necessary to design and adopt shared services between the schools and districts in the region. (p. 47)
10. The potential for closing Belvidere HS is being investigated because there has been a decrease in enrollment of 40% in the studied districts over the past twenty years. Closing a high school is not a common practice, and there are several considerations that should be examined in addition to the demographic, educational, and financial impacts. First, closing any school is a difficult decision emotionally, perhaps more so than educationally or financially. Second, the possible new receiving high schools would need to: (a) have the physical capacity to house additional students; and (b) want to accept new students onto their rolls. Third, any closing of a school program, development of new send-receive agreements, and/or termination of other agreements would need to be approved by NJDOE, and specifically the Commissioner of Education. It is not recommended that this be pursued unless the communities are convinced that the benefits of doing so decisively outweigh the drawbacks. (p. 48-50)

Demography

11. Births in the Belvidere area have been averaging 83 per year and trending 4+ births each year for the last six years. Births in the Great Meadows area have been averaging 71 per year and trending 2+ births each year for the last six years. (p. 58)
12. The data indicate that there are no planned major housing developments in any of the six municipalities that might impact school enrollment at this time. Permitting averages 27 units per year. As a percentage of the total units in each community, these are marginal increases

in housing with either approval for construction or those for which certificates of occupancy have been issued. (p. 59)

13. The enrollment history in the Belvidere Cluster from 2018 to 2024 shows overall decreases of 13.7% from 1,316 to 1,157 students. The enrollment history in Great Meadows from 2018 to 2024 shows overall decreases of 9.3% from 1,024 to 937 students. (p. 59-61)
14. The districts have expressed some desire to consider a more inclusive preschool program in an all-purpose, regional school district. The realistic pK universe is approximately 139 in the Belvidere Cluster and 113 in Great Meadows. At the state maximum of 15 students per classroom (and lower if some students have a need for a more self-contained environment), serving that population would require as many as 10 pK classrooms in the Belvidere Cluster and 8 pK classrooms in Great Meadows. (p. 61-62)
15. A comparison of the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 1,157 students in the Belvidere Cluster with the 2028-29 projection of 1,234 shows an increase of 77 students with a material averaged change of approximately 5.5 students per grade over fourteen grade levels. A comparison of the 2023-24 actual enrollment of 937 students in Great Meadows with the 2028-29 projection of 977 shows a marginal increase of 40 students with a material averaged change of just under three students per grade over fourteen grade levels. An enlargement of the current four district cluster into an all-purpose regional district with or without Great Meadows would not alter the overall enrollment projections in any way. (p. 62-65)
16. With Great Meadows MS having housed 509 students in 2003-04, the building would be sufficiently large from an enrollment perspective to house either a send-receive or regionalized middle school across the five-year enrollment projection. Without Great Meadows, the projected enrollment capacity of 230 in Belvidere HS would still be insufficient given that the lowest enrollment projection of the four elementaries is in 2027-28 at 233 students. The caveat to this is that Belvidere HS is on the same property and connected to Belvidere ES. Combining their enrollment capacities of 387 student seats would enable the four districts to consider a revised send-receive relationship to place all grades 6-8 students at the same site. The picture for combining grades 7-8 in one location allows for more choices, as Belvidere ES, White ES, and Belvidere HS all have enrollment capacity to house the cluster's grades 7-8 students.(p. 70-73)
17. If Belvidere were to decide to close its high school, it would be in possession of a large building on the same site as Belvidere ES. In 2003-04 these two buildings held 964 students, making it possible for the four Belvidere Cluster communities to at least consider consolidating their elementary districts into one pK-8 district to be housed at a single central site. (p. 73)
18. Combining Great Meadows and the Belvidere Cluster into an all purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district would result in an enrollment projected to grow to 2,212 students by 2028-29. The size and scope of such a district would provide it with an ability to be more

flexible in terms of resource allocation to provide more effective levels of instructional and support programs without incurring significant additional costs. (p. 74)

19. In 2023-24, the White population was 82.5% of the Belvidere Cluster enrollment and 76.9% of the Great Meadows enrollment. Comparisons for several other populations during that year were 10.8% versus 15.5% for Hispanics, 2.2% versus 2.0% for Blacks, and 0.9% versus 1.8% for Asians, respectively. Bringing the two groups together to form an all-purpose, regional school district would move toward balancing out the variations in race and ethnicity exhibited as separate entities. (p. 76)
20. In 2023-24, the free and reduced lunch population was 21.1% of the Belvidere Cluster enrollment and 13.5% of the Great Meadows enrollment. The English language learner population in the same year was 1.0% in the Belvidere Cluster and 3.5% in Great Meadows. Bringing the two groups together to form an all-purpose, regional school district would move toward balancing out the variations in income and language exhibited as separate entities. (p. 79)
21. The impact of a potential withdrawal of Great Meadows from its send-receive agreement with Hackettstown for its grade 9-12 students poses significant demographic concerns that call into question the continuation of Great Meadows in this study. The further inclusion of Great Meadows was paused pending review by the NJ Division of Local Government Services per state guidelines. The division's review concluded that this study should continue with Great Meadows' participation, and that the NJDOE would make a formal determination regarding school segregation as part of its review of the final study. (p. 80-81)

Education and Program

22. A centralized curriculum office can increase the efficiency with which it uses resources by eliminating duplicative efforts and services across the multiple districts. This can serve as a win for all of the districts, and ultimately the students, both financially and academically. The types of efficiencies discussed here could ultimately help in preserving instructional support systems, such as interventionists and teachers of students with special needs, throughout the expanded district or within the currently existing districts. (p. 91)
23. The information on curriculum and instruction demonstrates that students entering Belvidere HS from elementary schools in White, Hope, Harmony, and Belvidere have dissimilar educational backgrounds. Great Meadows joining an all purpose regional district would bring another set of disparate learning foundations. Having all students entering high school with shared experiences in terms of educational programs and philosophy, time spent studying each of those content areas, and the professional learning that accompanies those programs can offer multiple benefits. (p. 92)
24. Overall, shared educational programs in grades K-8 can contribute to more cohesive and effective approaches to a student's education, benefiting both students and educators alike.

Better alignment of programs in all grades pK-12 would result from regionalization or shared services. This would allow staff to further investigate programs and their results prior to making a decision about investments in them. Reducing the replication of program review, curriculum writing, and professional learning comes not only with financial benefits, but should also result in stronger academic programs throughout the region. (p. 92)

25. To achieve the goals of a successful middle school, it is preferable to educate grades 6-8 students in a separate school or program with a sufficient enrollment size that allows for greater opportunities to address their educational as well as their social and emotional learning needs. In addition, middle schools often have teachers with specific subject matter expertise, which can provide students with a deeper level of instruction. (p. 93)
26. Each of the four districts in the Belvidere Cluster has a relatively small number of students in grades 6-8, making it difficult for any of the districts to have subject matter and grade level team teaching, a hallmark of most middle schools. Belvidere has almost 100 students in grades 6-8, White has just under 90, Harmony has about 60, and Hope has approximately 35. If these grade levels were combined so that all students in grades 6-8 attended a single middle school program, there would be 275 students which would allow for grade level teams with specific subject matter expertise in every content area and a fuller range of student extracurricular activities. If Great Meadows joined, the middle school would have almost 500 students, which would provide an even greater opportunity for high quality experiences. (p. 94)
27. Based on this analysis, Belvidere HS's enrollment size has not provided an impediment to offering a reasonably broad and deep curriculum with many options to challenge and provide academic opportunities to its students. Its program of studies compares favorably to similarly sized high schools in the area and, in some ways, even to ones with much larger enrollments. (p. 100)
28. The data shows that all districts in the study are generally below, at, or at least close to suggested class size maximums. Regionalization of the districts may allow for decisions on more efficient placement or sharing of teaching staff. Instructional times are not inconsistent with other districts in the area. However, the alignment of the school day and instructional day across the districts, or in an all purpose regional district, would provide a more even playing field for all students in these schools. (p. 100-102)
29. There remain significant disparities among the elementary assessment scores in both ELA and Math at various grade levels. This adds further evidence to the recommendations in the previous subsections on the desirability of better curriculum coordination, common philosophies and instructional materials, and similar instructional time devoted to academic work. (p. 106)
30. Addressing achievement gaps requires that schools provide targeted support and resources to underserved students and communities, encourage a focus on culturally responsive teaching

practices, and implement policies that foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students. A more consistent program in ELA and Math, beginning in the younger grades, would yield more common student experiences and would potentially result in more productive professional learning communities, where teachers examine assessment data and the corresponding instructional strategies that generated those results. (p. 107-108)

31. The 2022-23 mSGPs indicate that student growth met or exceeded the federal accountability standard with the one exception of the Belvidere ES ELA results. The range of student growth scores provides an opportunity for district leaders, working within a regional setting, to examine the programs and instructional practices that are yielding the highest levels of student growth demonstrated in ELA and Math. By combining district- and building-level supervisory staff and reassigning responsibilities closely aligned to areas of expertise, a regional school district can better serve and provide targeted support to the teachers preparing students to meet or exceed academic standards and leave high school ready for college and careers. (p. 110)
32. Belvidere HS had higher graduation rates than the state average for each of the 4-year and 5-year cohorts from 2021-2023. Belvidere HS is graduating students at or above the state average in most cases, which compares favorably to the total graduation rate between it and the state average. In the case of students with disabilities, the school is doing quite well in preparing its students to meet their graduation requirements and earn their diplomas. Belvidere HS postsecondary enrollment rates are also above the state average for the Class of 2022. (p. 111-113)
33. An obvious sign of the collaboration between Belvidere, Harmony, Hope, and White is that they share one special services director who oversees the child study teams for the entire cluster. High rates of in-district placements speak well of each district's efforts to be effective and efficient while educating students in their home schools with their non-disabled peers. (p. 115-117)
34. The low numbers of English language learners in these schools do not require a full bilingual program, but eligible students must receive either English language services or an English as a second language program. Gifted and talented programs show some similarities and some differences in their approaches and the number of students involved. These programs could perhaps be more effectively or efficiently serviced by existing staff if united into one all purpose, regional school district or a grades 6-8 combined middle school program. (p. 121-123)
35. Despite its small enrollment, Belvidere HS offers 20 interscholastic athletic programs and 21 student clubs. Students are taking advantage of these opportunities at an impressive rate; in the 2023-24 school year, total participation in these activities by Belvidere HS students was 998 for an average of 3.2 activities per student. One of the benefits of a combined middle school for grades 6-8 would be the possibility of offering interscholastic athletic programs for competition against peers within the county and beyond. (p. 123-124)

36. In Belvidere, teacher salaries are below state medians but around the midpoint of their peer districts. This is because the state medians are based on all K-12 school districts (whether small, medium or large), whereas the peers are just the small K-12's. Having lower salaries than medium or large K-12s is perhaps to be expected, however it does not help the district in competing with others for personnel talent. Looking at K-8 school district salaries, there is considerable variety among White, Hope, and Harmony as compared to its peers and the state median. Teacher salaries make up the majority of personnel costs, and the differences here will need to be considered should the districts pursue regionalization. (p. 132)
37. It is important to have experience and stability among staff members to provide students with a sense of continuity and belonging. The average teaching experience in all five districts exceeds that of the state average by anywhere from two to four years. The teaching staff is stable in these districts too, as the percentage with four or more years on staff is anywhere from five to eighteen percent above the state average. (p. 134)
38. Projecting staffing needs for consolidated districts is based on a great deal of context and requires setting some parameters. This study considers it a given that all existing schools will remain open and operate with most school-level positions remaining as they presently do if there is a district regionalization. With school-level staff remaining relatively constant, the opportunities for efficiency will be more available by combining some positions on district office staffs, though there is a great deal of role sharing happening already. (p. 136)
39. Currently, there are administrative tasks replicated in five school districts that could be completed once. From the state monitoring system to district audits to routine report filings and countless other tasks, these responsibilities are done five times each time a deadline for said report or data upload is completed. This replication costs both time and money and drains resources from other productive uses. The reduction of this overlap would almost certainly result in staffing efficiencies and the ability to save money or redirect funding back to educational programming. (p. 137)
40. The creation of a combined middle school program in the Belvidere Cluster would be a school level change versus a district reorganization. In this scenario, school level staffing would likely undergo some consolidation due to scheduling efficiencies, though many of the middle level teachers would be employed in a new location. Achieving the benefits of a combined program will need focused leadership that may require additional personnel capacity, especially if the site is Belvidere HS/ES in light of the recent administrative restructuring there. (p. 137)
41. The team of consultants believes that grades pK-12 students in a new regionalized district or grades 6-8 (or 7-8) students in a combined middle school program would receive greater access to a higher quality, more equitable education than they currently receive. The closing of Belvidere HS is a more complicated scenario and does not yield confidence in terms of enhanced educational benefits for students or staff. (p. 138)

Finance and Operations

42. The participating districts show divergent state aid trajectories from 2020-2025. While Belvidere maintained relatively stable aid with moderate fluctuations, Harmony saw minimal changes due to its lack of equalization aid. In contrast, Hope, White, and Great Meadows experienced substantial declines as S2 eliminated their excess aid. Great Meadows saw the largest reduction, losing \$3.3 million over the period. By 2025, with SFRA fully funded, the districts receive a combined \$5.9 million in state aid, down from \$10.9 million in 2020. (p. 151)
43. The 2026-29 individual district projections show Great Meadows and Hope experiencing significant aid increases due to enrollment growth and adequacy budget changes. Meanwhile, Belvidere faces gradual declines, while Harmony and White see modest categorical aid growth. While individual district projections provide a baseline, regionalization would fundamentally change how state aid is calculated. (p. 155)
44. In the “all potential constituents” scenario, operating as separate districts would yield \$4.2 million more in annual state aid by 2029. Similarly, the “current cluster only” scenario shows nearly \$3 million more in annual state aid by 2029 if districts remain separate. Recent changes to state law through S3488 provide important protections against aid reductions resulting from regionalization. However, the existing protections are not enough on their own to bring the regional district’s aid up to levels that match state aid allocations to the separate districts under the consultants’ current interpretation of the law. This conundrum is why consultants are seeking a NJDOE interpretation, or clarifying statutory language, to address this provision in a manner that would provide a true “hold harmless” situation that promotes the State’s demonstrated interest in school district regionalization. (p. 159-162)
45. Current law provides that taxes may be apportioned on the basis of: the portion of each municipality’s equalized valuation allocated to the regional district; the number of students enrolled in the regional district from each municipality; or any combination of apportionment based on equalized valuations and enrollment. (p. 166)
46. After reaching highs in 2010, equalized valuations in each constituent municipality bottomed around 2017, trended sideways through 2022, and have been rising steadily through the present. In the “all potential constituents” scenario, White, Harmony, and Independence have the largest projected share of equalized valuations at between 23.4% and 24.7% each by 2029. Liberty demonstrates modest growth to 13%, while both Hope (8.2%) and Belvidere (7.3%) show declining trends. Similarly, the “current cluster only” scenario shows White (38.9%) and Harmony 36.8%) with much higher shares of the equalized valuations than Hope (12.8%) and Belvidere (11.4%) by 2029. (p. 168-169)
47. Total student enrollment across the entire group of six municipalities shows a general declining trend based on average daily enrollment from 2020 to 2025. In the “all potential constituents” scenario, Independence has the largest projected share of enrollment at 29.8%

in 2029, White is second at 17.5%, Liberty is third at 15.6%, and Belvidere, Harmony, and Hope are projected between 11.1% and 13.1% each. The “current cluster only” scenario for 2029 is closer with White having the largest share at 32.1% and the other three districts between 20.4% and 24.0% each. (p. 170-172)

48. The contrast between equalized valuation and enrollment shares reveals significant disparities in how costs would be allocated under each method. These disparities emphasize the significant impact the choice of apportionment method would have on each municipality's tax contribution, and provide the rationale for examining various weighted combinations of the two methods. (p. 172-173)
49. While the model attempts to identify a ratio permitted under state law that provides benefit to all communities, no such outcome is possible under current conditions. There is no combination of equalized valuation and enrollment parameters that produces tax savings for all municipalities in either regionalization scenario without the inclusion of substantially higher cost savings. While operational efficiencies from regionalization can help reduce the total tax levy, the underlying mathematics of redistributing costs means that finding a ratio that benefits all communities remains challenging. Therefore, decisions about regionalization in this cluster should consider the full spectrum of potential benefits – educational, operational, and programmatic – rather than focusing solely on tax impacts. (p. 175-177)
50. P.L.2021, c.402 permits a board of education to establish a transitional methodology, not to exceed ten years, of the apportionment method adopted by the voters provided that the methodology is agreed to by all participating districts. The language is designed to address situations where standard apportionment methods may not benefit all communities during the consolidation process. The transitional method was envisioned as a tool to facilitate school district regionalization in cases where immediate implementation of a new apportionment method might create financial hardships or disparities among the participating districts. It provides a mechanism to smooth out potential tax impacts over time, making the regionalization process more palatable to all stakeholders. (p.182)
51. It is clear that all four elementary districts prioritize direct spending on students in terms of the percentage of dollars allocated to classroom instruction as compared to their peer districts. Belvidere is at the state median percentage in classroom instruction. It is also among the highest in its peer group and more than double the state median percentage in extracurriculars. Combining these two spending categories shows how much Belvidere also prioritizes spending on direct student programming. (p. 184-185)
52. Both regionalization scenarios project modest financial benefits through administrative consolidation. The estimated cost savings of \$178,000 in the current cluster and \$558,000 with all constituents would primarily come from consolidating administrative functions and reducing duplication across the districts. However, these savings are partially offset by necessary investments in new positions and restructuring to serve the region. (p. 186)

53. The closing of educational programs in grades 6-8 in Harmony, Hope, and White would create certain efficiencies through consolidated staffing, more efficient deployment of specialized staff (e.g., art, music, language, etc.), and reduced curriculum and materials costs. The receiving district would face increased operational costs and additional staffing needs to accommodate the expanded student population. However, the sending districts, while eliminating middle school operations, could experience increased inefficiencies through diseconomies of scale as the remaining pK-5 programs spread fixed costs and administrative overhead across fewer students. (p. 187)
54. The consultants developed a model that can provide the boards of education with some information to help envision the potential for a combined middle school program. The costs to run the existing middle level programs are projected to be about \$4.9 million. The projected cost of a model combined middle school program comes in at just under \$3.7 million, providing an economy of scale of some \$1.2 million. Both tuition calculations show a lower cost than the projected \$3.7 million cost of the model combined program. (p. 188-191)
55. The districts in the Belvidere Cluster are unusual in that none currently have any outstanding bonded debt. Great Meadows does have existing debt and although the debt will be retired next year, the district is proposing a referendum vote in March 2025 to fund an \$8.1M project that would replace the retiring debt. Any debt would become an obligation of the new regional district if Great Meadows becomes a constituent. (p. 192)
56. As the largest district, Belvidere's collective bargaining agreement would govern staff in all grades after the initial three year period if a successor agreement is not reached in that time. The review of the main agreements provides useful information to aid the negotiations process should the districts decide to form an all purpose regional district, or can be used simply as points for comparison and synthesis in future negotiations. The analysis addresses similarities and differences among various aspects of the agreement to include expiration dates, recognition clauses, calendars and working conditions, salaries, leaves of absence, tuition reimbursement, and insurance coverages. Each of these areas will need to be carefully examined and cost out during contract negotiations following any potential regionalization. (p. 194-200)
57. It is obvious that the Belvidere Cluster has worked hard to establish money saving and efficiency enhancing shared services with an array of shared personnel. With extensive shared services in place, finding additional ones will prove challenging if the districts remain in their status quo governance. Great Meadows is a more independent district; consultants were not able to identify significant shared services. One idea for potential sharing would be to create a single, well staffed, regional administrative office, where operations could be centralized. Other suggested areas to look for sharing include directors, special subject teachers, counselors, special education, food services, and staff development. (p. 203)

58. In terms of transportation for the all purpose scenario without Great Meadows, the proposed regionalization would result in little to no change as far as what schools the students attend, so there would likely be little to no change to any of the current transportation programs. For the fuller regional scenario, buses from Great Meadows to Belvidere HS can be established without major changes though there would be some considerations to be addressed. Under the combined middle school approach, the recommendation is to locate the middle school program at the Belvidere HS/ES site for multiple reasons, not least of which is that middle school students from Hope, White, and Harmony could be added to the 54 passenger buses that are currently contracted at little to no additional cost. (p. 206-210)
59. The study suggests that, apart from savings due to economies of scale in purchasing or personnel, meal programs would not be significantly impacted by a pK-12 regionalization. Some of the districts in the current Belvidere cluster are finding it difficult to sustain financially successful food service programs. Whether or not regionalization occurs, it would be worth the districts exploring sharing a food service management company and, specifically, a director of food services. (p. 216-217)
60. A key question remains: what are the financial implications of expanding send-receive agreements to grades 6-12? From a macro perspective, there should be a comparable tradeoff between the increase in numbers of students for whom tuition will be paid versus the decrease in personnel and other resources for students who will no longer be educated there. A consideration, especially for Harmony and Hope, is that if their grades 6-8 students are sent to Belvidere, it will leave their schools with student enrollments of approximately 125 and 90, respectively. Since small districts struggle with balancing revenues and spending efficiently given lower economies of scale, reducing school enrollments may exacerbate this issue. (p. 223)
61. As of June 30, 2023, the participating districts have varying balances in these reserve accounts, with Great Meadows and White having the highest balances in capital reserves. Great Meadows and Belvidere have higher maintenance reserves than the other study districts. (p. 225)
62. The classroom availability data demonstrates that the Belvidere Cluster schools have a wide variety in terms of physical capacities. An all-purpose regional school district would have greater flexibility to assign students and grade levels as needed to more effectively and efficiently use available classroom spaces. (p. 229)
63. With anywhere from a projected 11 to 13 classrooms available over the next five years, Belvidere HS is the only school in the current cluster with sufficient capacity to consider housing an expanded send-receive middle school program. One possibility could be to unify grade 6 in Belvidere ES, and move all grades 7-8 students to Belvidere HS. Considering the educational advantages of combining grades 6-12 on one campus in one way or another, a middle school program at Belvidere HS/ES should be strongly considered, whether through expanded send-receive agreements or an all-purpose regional school district. (p. 229)

64. If an all-purpose, grades pK-12, regional school district becomes a reality, Belvidere HS would not have sufficient classroom space to house all grades 6-8 students, including those from Great Meadows, but could do so for grades 7-8. Great Meadows would have the capacity to house a regional grades 6-8 middle school at Great Meadows MS. This would require the district to reopen Liberty Township School, which closed to school operations at the end of the 2018-19 school year but has been maintained. (p. 229-230)