

Regional School District Planning Board, Community Talks

Summary and survey results

June 28 and June 30, 2022

I. Overview

Two Community Talks sessions were held on Zoom as an opportunity for members of the public to learn more and provide feedback about the preferred model of merging the Berkshire Hills Regional School District and the Southern Berkshire Regional School District into a single preK-12 district, maintaining all existing elementary and middle schools in place, but creating a new merged 9-12 high school to be built on the Great Barrington campus.

The sessions were widely advertised through communications from the superintendents of the two districts; postings and ads on social media; calendar listings in the *Berkshire Edge* and the *Berkshire Eagle*, emails sent to RSDPB members, the administrative offices of the eight participating towns, participants in last year's focus groups; and flyers posted in post offices, libraries, town halls, and public gathering places.

Ben Klompus served as the facilitator, while RSDPB Chair Lucy Praskher and RSDPB Project Manager Jake Eberwein presented information and addressed questions. Attendance at the Community Talks was 56 people on June 28 and 53 people on June 30, including 16 who attended both nights. The breakdown of participants was as follows (some fit into more than one category; thus the total attendance is lower than the sum of the separate categories):

ATTENDANCE	June 28	June 30
Total attendance	56	53
Elected officials	11	12
Parents BHRSD	10	9
Parents SBRSD	10	5
Interested community member	9	11
Staff BHRSD	3	1
Staff SBRSD	2	4
RSDPB members	11	8
RSDPB research team	4	4
Facilitator	1	1
RSDPB Admin	1	1
Press	3	2

The electronic tool Nearpod was used to help facilitate the process of getting interactive feedback. Participants were asked to share their screen between the Zoom connection, where they could see other participants, and the Nearpod tool, where they could see the slides and write on interactive Jam Boards. For the benefit of those who had difficulty using Nearpod or could not fit two screens on their device, the Zoom screen was shared. The first segment of the program was a presentation by Lucy Prashker and Jake Eberwein providing background information about the work that has been done and the preferred model. The slides that were presented at the session can be found [here](#).

A pre-reading that included an executive summary and three fact briefs and a group reading that included selected frequently asked questions were provided to the participants. These documents can be found on the cover page of the [RSDPB website](#).

This report summarizes feedback from participants at the two sessions and in the post-session survey. Most questions/comments fell within the following categories:

1. **EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES:** Expanded educational opportunities were viewed as a strength of the preferred model, including more course choices, more activities, more foreign languages, more rigor and engagement, and building on the strengths of both districts.
2. **CVTE:** Expanded CVTE was viewed as a strength of the preferred model as it could connect students to career paths and help to keep graduates in the area.
3. **LARGER POPULATION:** More social options and diversity in a merged high school was viewed as a strength.
4. **DETAIL:** Some participants expressed a desire to have more detailed information about the implementation of the preferred model.
5. **FINANCES:** Questions were raised about costs to towns, level of state support, possible cost savings, cost of CVTE, and cost of transportation.
6. **VOTING PROCESS:** There were questions about the voting process, including the timeline, what will happen if not all towns vote in favor of the preferred model, and how the new high school in Great Barrington will factor into a merger.
7. **PAYING FOR THE NEW SCHOOL:** Some expressed a concern that the new model could be perceived as getting SBRSD residents to pay for the new high school in Great Barrington.
8. **CHANGE AND LOSS:** Some participants, particularly those affiliated with SBRSD, expressed concern about implementing a major change and losing what they view as special about their district.
9. **SCHOOL CULTURE:** There was discussion about the two districts having different cultures/ identities and the need to have more time to discuss this topic.
10. **REACHING MORE PEOPLE:** There was discussion of the desirability of reaching more people through additional community outreach efforts such as in-person gatherings in each of the towns, meeting with students, spreading the word through town websites, and reaching out to those who do not have children in the schools.

II. Summary feedback during sessions

Participants were asked to write questions that they have on the electronic jam board. They could also raise their hands to ask questions. Some questions were answered during the session and others will be added to the Frequently Asked Questions on the RSDPB.org website if not already included.

QUESTIONS POSED BY PARTICIPANTS

TEACHING, LEARNING AND EXPERIENCES

- I noticed there will be time devoted to "educational visioning". What will that entail?
- Where does Mt. Everett's Wall-to-Wall Early College High School fit into the planning? What happens if a Monument student wants to choice in?
- If we make these changes, how do we ensure AMAZING education of the kids during the transition time? Change, growth, and literal construction is a lot to manage in addition to education!
- How will this work with Special Education? Have you been looking at that group?
- While the elementary and middle schools would continue at their current campuses, what kinds of increased collaboration, interchange or co-facilitation in those grades would *the students* see (i.e. in the classrooms, not 'behind the scenes')?
- How much thought has been given to combining the very different cultures of the two high schools?
- Why are we keeping the two small schools open in Egremont and New Marlborough with such declining enrollment?

- BHRSD and SBRSD have very similar attendance numbers and they are pretty awful. Does a smaller geographic area mean that students are more likely to show up for school? Even in the case of Lenox where 45% of students choice in, are the simpler bus routes from Pittsfield to Lenox more conducive to better attendance than buses that travel all of our rural roads?
- Why are you using 2016 graduation data? We know this information is not valid for Mt. Everett grads as there has been a major emphasis on college exploration and attendance.
- I understand the preferred model would be new to Massachusetts. Do we have, as a point of reference, other districts, outside the Commonwealth, that have followed this model and have you used that in considering the approach here?

FINANCE

- How are there cost savings if the Sheffield campus remains open and students are still bussed there? and we have to pay for a brand-new building?
- Don't understand when some key logistics/details get answered, such as understand appropriation of expenses across the 8 towns, bus schedules, what happens to unused facilities at Mt. Everett etc.
- Being the first of its kind in the state, what additional support from the state, financial or otherwise could we expect from the state?
- Will the amount of state aid increase for a combined district or will the larger district be allocated an amount equal to what each would receive separately?
- How will towns not included in this collaborative be charged?
- How will the change effect transportation cost given that current bus company has a monopoly?
- What is best source of latest analysis for financial assumptions on: expected State Assistance, debt financing, town assessment formulas, transportation costs?
- The FAQs need to include a real explanation of Chapter 74 programs and what it means for town budgets if students "choice in" to the new high school and a town is not part of a new district.
- For CVTE what are costs, does it qualify for additional state support, and if so how much?

VOTING

- How many towns need to vote to approve and do all the towns need to vote to dissolve the existing regional agreements as well?
- What happens if 1 town votes it down? How many towns need to be in favor for this to be a go?
- What happens if two or three towns turn down the merger or even one town? FAQs should include whatever your research team has come up with for how these towns will educate their children.
- Will the timeline for towns to decide whether to go with the merger change if there are still community questions?
- What is the timeline for town residents voting on the final recommendation?
- Do the town votes have to be unanimous? What happens if they are not?
- If this proposal does not get voted in by the team or the towns, what is the next step? Does another option get analyzed at that point?
- Does the vote for regionalization take place before we know if the town will approve the new building vote? What if the town does not approve a new building?
- Is part of the 8 Town project (budget) allocated for outreach on the referendum vote in each town? Or are the individual towns, districts, or schools responsible for those campaigns?

HIGH SCHOOL LOCATION/CONSTRUCTION

- How long will it be until the new building is completed?
- Am I correct that in the preferred model, the proposed new HS campus would be the location for *all* HS programming, incl all CVTE, all extracurriculars, etc? That is, the current Mt Everett HS would not be repurposed for ongoing use?
- If Mt. Everett is to be repurposed, what reasonably would it become considering it is attached to the elementary school?
- Has there been any discussion as to what would happen with the Mt. Everett building?

PROCESS

- What type of unification strategies will be used, for example, a new name for combined district, or new high school name?
- How are you and subsequently we planning on reaching a much wider audience with all this information?

STAFF

- How many teachers and/or staff members will ultimately be laid off?

The next set of feedback was to identify strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats of implementing the preferred model. There was discussion around each of these four categories, resulting in the feedback that is grouped into themes below.

STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THREATS

Strengths

CVTE Offerings

- More vocational options.
- Much larger vocational offerings along with financial savings to the 8 towns.
- The potential for vocational training, especially with internships, is wonderful.
- Expanded CVTE offerings, critical to our region
- A single, modern high school with an adjacent VOTECH facility that does not stigmatize those who chose one or another career path.
- Allows to broaden CVTE options---at a scale that will connect students to a variety of career paths.
- A relief for VOTECH students who have to go to North Adams or Pittsfield for vocational training whereby the towns pay large amounts for tuition and transportation, which is increasingly happening in South County.
- New CVTE options will keep graduates in the area.

MORE EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS (more generally)

- Provide more educational opportunities for all students
- An opportunity to stay relatively small but expand access and opportunities.
- More opportunities, experiences, and offerings for my children. More funding for programs that may or may not already exist at the other district.
- This model offers students way more opportunity not just academically, but socially as well.
- It reaches all students and allows them options that best fit who they are and who they want to become.

Challenges

MERGING CULTURE/IDENTITY/EDUCATION

- Merging the culture of the districts-- particularly high schools. The cultures are very different.
- Although culture is a challenge, blending cultures could be the greatest strength.
- Developing a shared regional identity united around a shared purpose to educate our kids
- Merging/developing the curriculum and having the teachers buy-in
- Work needs to be done to ensure that Mt. Everett students' concerns and voices are heard.
- It will take commitment and work to create a culture of excellence.
- SBRSD is more egalitarian, BHRSD has economic stratification.

SENSE OF LOSS

- Loss of exceptional programs from SBRSD.
- Students who would fall through cracks get a lot of attention at SBRSD.
- We have strong communities with strong identities and the fear about what might be lost can be overwhelming for some.
- Possible closure of satellite schools in the future (although not part of preferred model).

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

- Fear of change.
- Opening minds to the possibilities.
- Moving people beyond present is hard.

- Build on and extend strengths of both school districts, create a stronger south county educational community
- Preferred model provides a vision for state-of-the-art instruction, expanded curriculum, and potential cost savings in environment with fewer students; doing it alone is increasingly hard to justify.
- Great programs at both schools; putting everything together is a good idea.

COST SAVINGS

- Keep educational costs from skyrocketing
- Consolidation of overlapping administrative and operating functions resulting in net savings
- Combined use of human resources, especially for programs like SPED.
- Giving higher quality of education while managing affordable costs for the taxpayers.
- Financial stability, pooling resources, enhanced programs.
- Tax burden is a relatively low number – hope people don’t get hung up on this.

LARGER STUDENT POPULATION

- Larger student body provides wider group for experiences and sharing new points of view.
- Increased diversity in student population
- Having more students would not be a negative, would only help them become better people if exposed to more things.
- Students will find more like-mindedness with a larger cohort in high school.
- Even eight towns together is still a manageable smaller scale where relationships matter and kids can carve their path.
- Small AP classes with just 4-5 people could be more rigorous and engaging with a larger population.

- Embracing the need to change.
- Lot of turf anxiety right now.
- The size of the school will more than double for Mt. Everett, huge increase, it’s a gift to be in a place where people know you, students will get lost with merger.

GETTING PEOPLE ON BOARD

- Securing buy-in from voters in the 8 towns, esp. those not currently parents of k-12 students, who don't see the utility to South County in future decades.
- Biggest challenge is during next phase-getting people on board. If that happens there will be a tremendous and sustained burst of energy and commitment.
- People love their own district, need to get them on board. That’s a hurdle to get over.

PERCEPTION THAT SBRSD IS PAYING FOR NEW SCHOOL

- Convincing voters in the SBRSD that they are not paying for a 'Great Barrington School'.
- This is embedded in some peoples’ head, hard for them to overcome.
- It was noted that Stockbridge agreed to contribute funds to study the new school without consideration to whether the districts would merge, unfair to say they are trying to get \$\$ from other towns to pay for school.

LONGER TRANSPORTATION TIMES FOR HS Students

- Longer commutes for some students making participation in extracurricular activities prohibitive.
- Longer bus rides for many.

Opportunities

LARGER POPULATION/SOCIAL OPTIONS

- Opportunity to have larger population would afford many more students to 'connect'... difficult to achieve when less than 50 students in graduating class.
- Wider friendships.
- Increased social experiences, more diversity.
- Students will have a broader view of the world, seeing a wider array of students.

Threats

RELUCTANCE FROM SBRSD

- Many (most?) Mt. Everett students do not want to move schools.
- This is something that is getting done to SBRSD.
- Fear of being swallowed up/gobbled up by bigger fish/BHRSD.
- This group is mostly made up of the already convinced. Many more out there

- Provide kids with a wider world of grown-ups and peers to learn from and connect to
- I asked my Mt. Everett 2020 graduate ...more people for clubs, more competitive sports teams but she likes Mt. Everett the way it is....
- Meeting friends from numerous towns, broadening one's world.

MORE EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS/OPPORTUNITIES

- More access to higher level material (AP, electives, college collaborations), vocational training, and diverse after school options.
- Ability to be educated to go to college or to step into the work force right here in the Berkshires. Quality options for all student abilities and interests.
- Language study and lower cost foreign travel. We offer no Asian languages; many students interested in ASL.
- Attract new families who often view quality of education as #1 factor in choosing a community.
- Opportunities for more rigor and more engagement.
- Many educational offerings and sustaining options that may be lost in future as population declines.
- Expanded curricular offerings.
- This allows diverse offerings that will support a wide range of students. More opportunities to explore passions and interests and to thrive.

CVTE

- Additional campus extensions: farming, for example. A major asset in the area is land.
- Larger array of class offerings, intro to CVTE whether they select that option, and CVTE education itself.

SOMETHING NEW

- Exciting new approach brings focus to the area thereby increasing interest in our schools.
- Take a new course, make a new friend. Tolerate something they have never been exposed to. Be really good at something they never did before.
- Using merger to do things differently— seizing opportunity to try new approaches.

COMING TOGETHER

- Break cycle of adults' thoughts of 2 different cultures.

in SBRSD who are not and are very much against this idea.

LACK OF ACCURATE/COMPLETE INFORMATION

- Lack of time or interest and an unwillingness to study data.
- Misinformation.
- Lack of an educated electorate, i.e. *I'm not paying for another town's school.*
- Inflexible thinking, not understanding impact this investment could have.
- Need to do a better job of making people more aware of issues.

TRUST/TURF/CHANGE ISSUES

- Complex issues around trust, motives, and turf.
- Fear and unwillingness to change.
- Fear of something new.
- Change fatigue.
- Lack of trust in the expanded regional system, and adoption but difficulties in delivering the plan.

VOTERS WHO ARE NOT ENGAGED

- Voter apathy.
- Those that have not been engaged throughout the process coming in last minute and souring the vote.

MISSING THE OPPORTUNITY

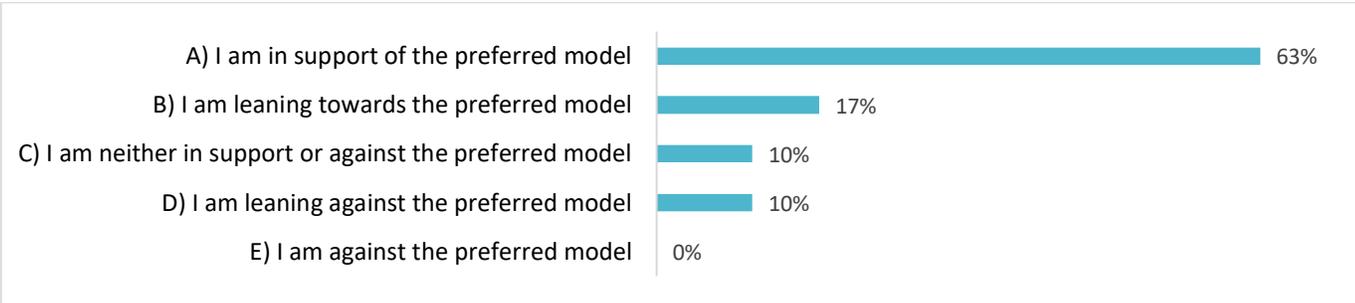
- If we think only in the present moment, and within the confined borders of our individual communities, we may miss the moment to set our broader community up for success years from now. We owe this to our children and grandchildren.

INVOLVING YOUTH

- Youth will want to know why they weren't consulted if they don't get a chance to participate. They will get information out if brought to the table. Great track record in South County with youth groups/programs, ie. RSYP.

At the end of the session, participants were asked to respond to a poll asking how they are feeling about the direction of the work. The results are below, showing that close to two-thirds of those who responded to the poll are in support of the model and an additional 17% are leaning toward supporting it. Staff and parents affiliated with BHRSD were all leaning towards or in support of the model, while parents and staff connected with SBRSD were mixed in their opinions. It should be noted that for the two sessions combined, only 30 out of 92 people responded, including seven who are RSDPB members. Some may have dropped off from the meeting early, some were participating without opening up Nearpod on their screens, which was needed to respond to the poll, and others may have been reluctant to respond. The poll results should be viewed as a temperature check at the end of the sessions, but not a scientific poll on how the larger public is likely to respond.

Overall, how are you feeling about the direction of this work? (n=30)
Total unduplicated votes over both sessions



Breakdown of voting categories:

	Parent BHRSD	Parent SBRSD	Staff BHRSD	Staff SBRSD	Community Member	Elected Official	RSDPB member	TOTAL
A	6	1	1	1	4	0	5*	18
B	1				2	1	2	6
C		1		1**		1		3
D		1		1		1		3
E								0
TOTAL	7	3	1	3	6	3	7	30

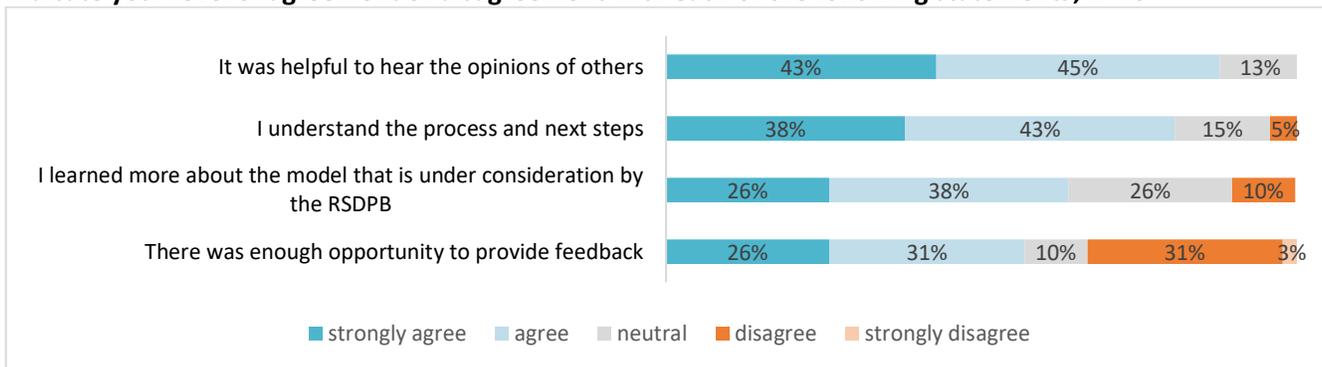
*Two RSDPB members who chose "A" are also elected officials but listed in RSDPB column only to avoid double counting
 **One SBRSD staff member who chose "C" is also a Parent SBRSD but listed in Staff column only to avoid double counting

III. Survey results

A link to a Survey Monkey feedback survey was provided at the end of each session and then emailed to all participants. Out of 91 participants (including everyone except the facilitator), there were 40 responses, for a 44% response rate. This could possibly include duplicate surveys from people who attended both sessions.

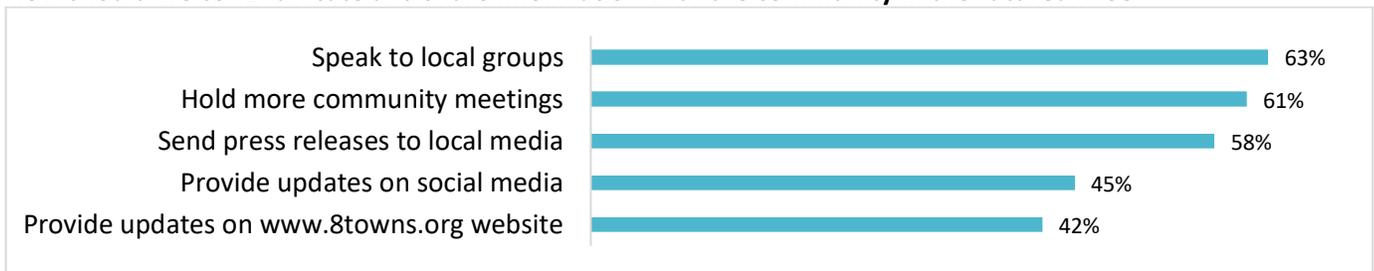
The question below shows the level of agreement or disagreement with four statements related to what they got out of the session. Responses were mostly favorable for *It was helpful to hear the opinions of others* and *I understand the process and next steps*. About one third of respondents disagreed that there was enough opportunity to provide feedback. After reviewing the survey results from the first session, more time was allotted in the second session for feedback.

Indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements, n=40



The next question pertained to how information should be communicated in the future. The choices of *speaking to local groups*, *holding more community meetings*, and *sending press releases to local media* were selected by more than half of respondents. Other suggestions for reaching people were offered and are summarized below. There are many helpful suggestions about holding gatherings in places in the eight communities where people go, reaching more audiences, and sending out information, and posting information on social media and websites.

How should we communicate and share information with the community in the future? n=38



OTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR COMMUNICATING AND SHARING INFORMATION

GATHERINGS

- Go to the people – events, library, grocery store, anywhere community members go
- Hold in-person meetings as well as virtual ones
- In-person talk at Monterey Library (has good ventilation).
- Ask each town to hold an informational meeting.
- Piggyback on existing school and community meetings (PTA, sports, Rotary, VFW, etc.)
- Have Community Talk community attendees each bring three others to in-person meetings.

TARGET AUDIENCES

- Get youth involved.
- Invite parents and teachers who are fearful of the change; do facilitated conversations to share concerns and work on how to break down fears.
- Meet with teachers of the two districts.
- Invite businesses to host a town meeting.

SENDING/EMAILING INFORMATION

- Send information to parents of students in the 8 towns in hard copy and post on social media.
- Send out through school media and town media.
- Send to towns' websites.
- Email people who have attended meetings

Participants were asked to offer comments or questions about what was discussed at the session. Their responses are summarized and categorized into topics below. Some expressed appreciation for the format and content of the sessions. The technical aspect of the sessions did not work well for everyone. There were suggestions about having more detailed information and more time for discussion. Some commented that they would like to hear more from people who are both in favor and opposed to the preferred model and that they would like to see more participation from community members.

FEEDBACK/SUGGESTIONS

APPRECIATED FORMAT AND CONTENT

- Very efficient. Feedback tool worked better than I expected.
- Meeting was very helpful and informative.
- I appreciate the transparency. I feel informed and ready to move forward!
- This meeting was incredibly well-run. Platform allowed thoughtful input and variety of people to share thoughts and opinions.
- Great format – liked the interactive nature.
- Good work. Maybe videotape the presentation and put it out there.
- Thanks for your planning on this.
- Holding small sessions is effective, but rural towns don't like to be identified; tonight's format worked well for people willing to speak up.

LOGISTICS OF SESSION

- Very few people have two hours to spare for a community meeting.
- Slightly difficult to switch between zoom and link for FAQs, pre-read and interactive notes.
- Please consider that parents with children have a hard time participating in 2-hour session during dinner time. It felt like much of it could have been condensed and the speakers could talk faster.
- There was too much prep, presale; wanted to get to the meat of what the options were and how we can continue to learn/take action.
- Did not find this meeting helpful as not sure it lived up to how it was billed, found the technology used confusing, dropped off early.

WOULD LIKE MORE DETAIL

- There was no comprehensive statement with financial information or representations of how and who would make financial decisions concerning the contributions of the towns. There were no reasons and facts (just conclusions) given for why this proposal was selected.
- I don't understand when we will get the details needed to vote on a new school agreement. Was intrigued when 7 towns were mentioned - does this refer to Egremont's threat to blow it all up?

- There was not much time left for open discussion of the concerns that people brought up.

NEED TO HEAR BOTH SIDES

- Communication is good but you also need to listen, especially to those that oppose the merger. There are many community members opposed to this merger. Bigger is not always better.
- The meeting was more about how to convince community members to approve the merger. Future meetings should be open for discussion on all topics so RSDPB can hear both sides.
- Wasted time in beginning with summary of the work. Needed more interactive conversation.

NEAR TO HEAR FROM OTHERS

- Should have active participation and input from the people that will be most benefited by the proposed plan, i.e., students
- Disappointed that only selected questions were answered and that very few people from the community attended.

WOULD LIKE TO EXPLORE TOPIC OF CULTURE

- Concerned that the issue of culture is not fully addressed - has been brought up numerous times

KEEPING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS OPEN

- Keeping the elementary schools open is so crucial (New Marlboro Central and Egremont). Even a straight drive is 35 mins for some students. That is too long for small children.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THINGS STAY THE SAME

- Focus was too much on a comparison of the districts at present. We owe it to the people to demonstrate much more concretely the ill effects of the present configuration in the future.

The final survey question asked about information that would be helpful in the future. The topics that were mentioned are grouped by theme below. Many requests for more information were related to getting more details, more information on finances, finding ways to reach more people, and exploring the idea of a combined culture.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION THAT WOULD BE HELPFUL

MORE DETAILS

- Need more detailed information on what this would look like for students and teachers.
- Detailed analysis of what SBRSD will look like in a decade including per pupil cost, courses and whether courses and extracurricular activities have been cut or greatly diminished. Compare SBRSD in 10 years to a school that is currently that size – what are they unable to provide?
- More details in all areas, including district merging process, steps are required by the state, process of dissolution of the existing districts, steps to creating a new district, timelines. How will union contracts and pensions be merged, and will there be early retirement options that will not affect those? Will both school committees be included in overseeing the changeover?

FINANCES

- Have heard feedback that people are waiting for specific numbers for how it will change their taxes.
- Seems fiscally necessary but concerns remain.
- Will there be cost savings to Monterey if we are still paying to keep Mt. Everett open and open a new school in GB. Do we really think we can save on costs?

REACH MORE PEOPLE

- Get Southern Berkshire teachers, staff and school committee on board and I think you'll be golden.

They clearly don't want any of it and feel forced into it.

- Need to invite parents and teachers to an open discussion; get resisters to a facilitated discussion.
- Egremont would like community dialogue and conversations in one or our public spaces with some frequency. Hope other towns do the same.

COMBINED CULTURE

- Would like to know what new district will be called; new HS should not be called Monument Mtn
- Need to help work against turf issues.

TRANSPORTATION

- Is there a way to provide our own busing? Is Massini's price fair?
- What are larger transportation considerations? Can the state tie in repair of bridges to open alternate routes around GB? Are there electric buses that reduce amount of CO2 being emitted?

SCHOOL CHOICE

- More information on how many students choiced out of SBRSD over past 5-10 years. Classrooms are small because many choice into BHRSD or go to Steiner.

TRANSITION

- What is the plan to educate our children during transition and growth times?