

Report to the Rochester School Board
Options for Sustainability of the Rochester Secondary School
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Summary

The Rochester School Board initiated this study to better understand the situation of the secondary program in Rochester and to consider options for sustainability, both educationally and financially. Student performance and opportunity data, financial information, and community perceptions were collected to develop the picture and to address four questions.

Background Data

The Rochester School is a PreK-12 public education system located in Rochester, Vermont. Total enrollment has declined over the past several years from 250 students in 2004 to 143 today. In that same time the high school program decreased from 94 to 55 students. Measures of high school completion and postsecondary enrollment are in line with other area schools, but performance on state assessments in reading and mathematics is below state averages. Learning and extracurricular opportunities are limited as a traditional high school program cannot be efficient in the use of staff in a school with small enrollment.

Recently, the high turnover in school leadership has translated to concern about the academic program. This concern, combined with the declining enrollment, resulted in area families outside of Rochester, choosing to send their children to schools other than Rochester. The draw of larger schools with a variety of opportunities is stiff competition.

Financially, the school is supported by a state small schools grant, tuitions from towns when parents choose to send their children to Rochester, and a state rule protecting towns experiencing sharp declines in enrollment from large increase in tax rates. Until last year, these supports and tight budgets have limited the rise in cost per student and homestead property tax rates. Financial pressures will continue to mount requiring more austere budgets and increased tax rates.

Study Questions

- 1. What needs to happen in order for the secondary program to grow and attract more area students?*

Attracting additional high school students from outside Rochester is the major key to sustaining the high school program. If enrollment continues to decline, it will be impossible to sustain even the current program. Counting the total student population in Rochester, Hancock, and Granville, the maximum potential for a future high school program is about the current size of 55 students. Some families in the two choice towns, Hancock and Granville, are attracted to high schools with larger student opportunities than Rochester can support. It is unlikely that the Rochester high school program will draw the maximum enrollment possible in the valley thereby leading to a continuing decrease in high school enrollment.

In order to draw additional students, Rochester needs to take advantage of its small size and community strengths. The program needs to become known as the place where students have

individualized programs that focus on proficiency as the basis for graduation; technology based instruction and assessment systems; learning opportunities designed around students' interests; and active learning with apprenticeships, internships, and student designed experiences. Such a program would be different from other area high school programs and would have the potential to draw students from beyond the valley.

2. If the school does not grow, what are the options for students and what are the tax consequences?

Three possibilities were considered if the school does not grow. Option one: Designate an area high school for Rochester students. The students would benefit from increased opportunities and the community would have continuity of spirit as Rochester students would be involved in one set of academic and extracurricular programs. Transportation support would be straightforward. Rochester might be able to negotiate a formula for tuition and have some influence at the designated school, but that school district would retain governance responsibility.

Option two: Establish a joint high school with one or more area high schools and develop magnet campuses with the Rochester campus focused on the arts. Partner with higher education to develop these magnet programs serving both high school and college students. This would be unique in Vermont and serve to draw students from other towns. Rochester would retain a high school program and serve students from several towns. Rochester would be a partner in governance of the joint school and would have a say in the finances. Rochester voters would vote on the school budget.

Option three: Eliminate the Rochester high school program and allow families to choose the high school they would like to attend. Students would be disbursed to a variety of high schools. Transportation, especially for students from families with fewer resources, would limit extracurricular opportunities for students. Rochester would have little influence on programs and costs.

3. What are some of the possibilities if the mission of the school changes? (dual enrollment, community college, engagement with businesses and community, serving foreign students)

In order to sustain a high school program at Rochester School, the mission of the school needs to change. With declining enrollment and increasing financial pressures, continuing to offer a traditional high school program will not be possible. Most staff positions would need to be reduced to part time and the program will draw fewer students rather than more. Partnerships with higher education, businesses, and the community will require a very different program mission.

4. What are the possibilities of Rochester Town School District becoming a supervisory district independent of any supervisory union?

The responsibilities of the supervisory union or supervisory district are the same no matter the size of the system. There would be no economy of scale for Rochester as a supervisory district and the responsibilities would detract from the educational work of the school. The Vermont State Board of Education has been looking to make larger supervisory unions and would not make Rochester a single supervisory district.

Next Steps

The next steps for the Rochester School Board are to determine what program and structure will best prepare Rochester high school students for their next steps and will be supported financially by the voters. While the existing data is important in their deliberations, the next step is political. Can the Board and the community envision a transformed high school that would be acceptable and even prized?