

NH House Bill 349 Establishing a Special Purpose School District for Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton

BACKGROUND

The Bridgewater-Hebron Village District (B-HVD) is a separate political subdivision created by statute in 1997 and is comprised of the Towns of Bridgewater and Hebron. This statute authorized both towns to build the Bridgewater-Hebron Village School (B-HVS). Three elected commissioners oversee the school facility and grounds.

The Village District then constructed and continues to own, debt-free, the Bridgewater-Hebron Village School building, surrounding athletic fields, and furnishings. It leases the school to the Newfound Area School District (NASD or SAU4) for \$1.00 per year. Teachers, staff, and curriculum management are provided by the Newfound Area School District.

The school was built to alleviate overcrowding in SAU4 at a multimillion-dollar cost to the taxpayers of Bridgewater and Hebron in 1999. Since then, Bridgewater and Hebron have spent **over \$8 million dollars in maintenance, repair, and capital improvements**. Over the years, Bridgewater and Hebron students have been a minority among students attending the school. Children from other towns have always been welcome to attend and that hopefully will continue.

VISION AND GOAL

House Bill 349 before the legislature is designed to **expand on our legal status as a village district** and explore, **over a four-year period**, the establishment of a three-town special purpose school district. This is a multi-step process and the first step (after passage), is to hold a vote in Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton to determine if our citizens want to establish a K-8 SAU. If our towns vote in the affirmative, then additional steps follow as outlined in the bill.

Our vision is to improve education outcomes for our children with an innovative alternative to a traditional middle school. **Our goal** is to reconfigure B-HVS to a K-8. Numerous studies have shown that the fewer number of transitions children make before high school the greater the improved student performance. In fact, all seven towns in Plymouth's SAU48 use the K-8 model.

Hill, NH also formed a separate school district after withdrawing from the Franklin School District. They operate their own elementary school and tuition into the Newfound Area School District for grades 7-12. Hill is a model for such a reconfiguration.

EXPANDING OUR SUCCESSFUL EDUCATION MODEL

The Bridgewater-Hebron Village School's education performance is outstanding and ranked among the top K-5 schools in the state. It is consistently performing in the top 20th percentile in the state for math and English. Reconfiguring to a K-8 allows us to continue our proven high academic standards with a coherent curriculum, effective instruction, strong leadership, results-based accountability, and sound discipline through the 8th grade.

This educational approach has proven to pay-off in the primary grades. Establishing a K-8 school will allow more effective local control and extend that academic pay-off for an additional three years through 8th grade. Moreover, this approach will allow us to better manage educational costs, and most importantly, give parents an innovative alternative to traditional middle schools.

WHY NOW?

Our citizens and parents overwhelmingly desired to establish a K-8 within the Newfound Area School District in 2013. Then, as now, we wanted to improve student outcomes by reconfiguring B-HVS to K-8.

The 2013 reconfiguration process never moved forward, primarily based on concern about the financial impact on the Town of Groton and the potential of limited attendance. But today, that situation has changed, and now, with Groton in the mix, establishing our own school district with a K-8 school may be a viable option if our voters so choose.

Moreover, today parents are becoming more engaged in educational outcomes for their children. There's a growing trend toward alternative education options to include Freedom Accounts, education tax credits for scholarships, charter schools, open enrollment, school choice, home schooling and, **in our local case, a trend toward the public K-8 model.**

Currently SAU4 is considering reconfiguring elementary school education in the Newfound Area School District. School building consolidation is being actively discussed and B-HVS will not be exempt from those discussions. It's possible B-HVS could be closed by SAU4 in the coming years.

Given this climate, we now have a unique opportunity to explore options and find creative solutions to long-standing challenges. It's important to take our time and thoughtfully think through these issues: **the bill before the legislature poses no risks and gives us the authority and the time (four years) to thoughtfully explore options.**

MYTHS AND FACTS

Myth: This bill is simply a way for Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton to save money and keep taxes low.

Fact: Not true. Constructing an addition to B-HVS for K-8 classrooms; hiring additional teachers and support staff; and entering into tuition agreements for sports, extracurricular activities and high school all come with attendant start-up costs. The citizens of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton will foot this bill (excluding the capital costs paid for by B-HVD). Fortuitously, the school was originally constructed with sufficient plumbing and HVAC to accommodate future expansion but there will be new start-up expenses.

Myth: This bill will cause major disruption throughout the Newfound Area School District.

Fact: Not true: We would seek to stay closely aligned with SAU4 and work cooperatively with the Newfound Area School District to support quality education for our children. We would support space-based reciprocal enrollment for grades K through 8 and consider service contracts for administrative services and a tuition agreement for high schoolers. By inviting students from other towns to attend, we would be offering parents a choice between a traditional middle school and a K-8 program. We would seek a cooperative relationship.

Myth: This bill will increase costs to the Newfound Area School District.

Fact: Unlikely. The current student count of Bridgewater, Hebron, and Groton accounts for about 15% of the student body and the corresponding budget contribution is roughly 16%. We estimate that the reduction in middle school expenses coupled with SAU4 gains in tuition and administrative revenue would result in little to no fiscal impact to SAU4.

Myth: This bill will cost the Newfound Area School District jobs and adversely affect teachers.

Fact: Not true. This bill will create jobs – not reduce them. The legislation contains a provision for job offerings with a transfer of pay, benefits, and pensions to current teachers and staff. We will likely need to hire several additional teachers for 6-8th grades. Service contracts and tuition agreements would also support maintaining current staffing levels at SAU4.

Myth: There is no provision for sports and extracurricular activities for grades 6-8.

Fact: Not true. This is a critical component of modern education. Our intent is to provide these same opportunities via tuition agreements with a larger district. We recognize this is important, but not at the expense of a better educational opportunity.

Myth: This bill will mandate we leave the district.

Fact: Not true. This bill gives us a streamlined option to create our own district. We have four years to research and determine if this is the best choice for our towns and our children before the authority in the bill expires. In the end, our voters will decide.

Myth: We have no experience in running a school district.

Fact: Not entirely true. There are multiple components to running a district. From a facilities perspective we have operated and maintained the school for 22 years. Many of our citizens have been involved at multiple levels in school districts including a former NH State Commissioner of Education. We have a deep pool to draw from. We would seek to outsource functions that would require special expertise or need economies of scale. This is why the bill contains a four-year planning provision.

In summary: Let's be clear: we as citizens have a responsibility to provide for our children's public education. We should take advantage of this unique opportunity to explore options and find creative solutions to long-standing educational challenges.

Again, House Bill 349 poses no risks and gives us the authority and the time (four years) to thoughtfully explore options.

HB-349 text: https://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/bill_status/billinfo.aspx?id=282&inflect=2