

CORNISH COLLABORATION COMMITTEE REPORT

On March 8, 2014, the Plainfield School District voted to establish a Committee to study possible collaboration opportunities with the Cornish School District. This committee met a half dozen times beginning in August of 2014. A longer version of our report posted on the Plainfield School website (<http://www.plainfieldschool.org>), describes contextual elements (enrollment trends, historical perspective, Cornish' consideration of Cornish-Plainfield collaboration, and demographics of Plainfield, Cornish, and surrounding towns), and presents analytical details.

Approach and Analysis. Our committee aimed to inform evaluation of a range of options, both now and in the future, and to make recommendations about the path forward. Three models for delivering services and distributing students between the Cornish and Plainfield school buildings were considered:

- ***Shared SAU services.*** Each school remains independent with K-8 instruction in each building. Plainfield and Cornish would share Supervisory Administrative Unit services (Superintendent, Special Education Director, Business Manager), likely by forming a single SAU.
- ***Lower School/Upper School.*** Cornish & Plainfield utilize both school buildings to educate the children of both towns, with an 'Upper School' in one building and a 'Lower School' in another.
- ***One school,*** Cornish & Plainfield would utilize one building to educate the children of both towns.

These options were evaluated and compared to the status quo (separate school districts with no shared SAU services). Other options, for example having one school for most grades but with one or more early grades in both towns, are possible and worthy of evaluation.

Drawing upon the expertise of Dr. Vogt, our experience as school board members and/or parents, and any common sense we were able to muster, the Committee attempted to evaluate the educational quality impacts of the three models defined above. Anticipated impacts of continuing the status quo were also considered. In the Committee's view, the number of students per grade in one building is the most important feature of the various models from the point of view of educational quality. Specific factors impacting educational quality that are expected to improve with increasing numbers of students per grade in one building are listed in the long version of the report.

The Committee developed cost estimates using a detailed spreadsheet model developed for this purpose, informed by familiarity with operations and educational expenditures in Plainfield. As part of this, we obtained estimates for transportation costs for the three options defined above, subject to the condition that the maximum transport time would not be higher than is the case now. The committee believes that the *Shared SAU Services* model could be implemented with no additional costs to Plainfield taxpayers, and indeed that it is fair and appropriate to stipulate this as a condition of adopting this model. The *Lower School/Upper School* model does not appear to offer potential for large cost savings, and could incur modest cost increases depending on how it was implemented. The *One School* model appears to be an opportunity to achieve large cost savings. Taking all factors into consideration, our preliminary analysis indicates that the magnitude of projected annual reductions in the combined education budgets in Plainfield and Cornish for the One School model are at least \$500K as compared to the status quo, and possibly much more depending on how uncertainties are resolved and implementation decisions yet to be made. The cost of any renovation we can foresee would be considerably less than the

anticipated savings of the *One School* model in the first year it was implemented. Additional ongoing transportation costs associated either the *Lower School/Upper School* or *One School* models are also expected to be small in comparison to the savings expected from the *One School* model.

Framing our Choices. As outlined in Table 1, the committee believes that the status quo entails continued compromises with respect to educational quality, and risks related to maintaining quality while containing cost as well as loss of local control and declining property values. The *Shared SAU Services* model would likely result in small but positive changes relative to the status quo with respect to educational quality, neutral cost impact, and allow budgets to be independently set by Plainfield and Cornish voters as occurs now. We see no significant risks associated with the *Shared SAU Services* model. The *Lower School/Upper School* model offers substantial educational benefits relative to the status quo, neutral cost impact, and likely would entail formation of a single Plainfield/Cornish School district. The *One School* model offers substantial benefits with respect to both educational quality and cost, and likely would entail formation of a single Plainfield/Cornish School district. Formation of a single school district for both towns involves shared governance which may be seen as a risk, and also potential disruptions during transition. For the town that no longer had a school, a local focal point would be lost but a new link to a larger community would be gained.

Table 1. Summary Evaluation.

| Model | Educational Quality | Cost Impact | Number of School Districts | Risks |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|--|
| Status quo | Continued compromises likely | Neutral | 2 | Challenging to maintain quality while containing cost. Possible loss of local control, declining property values. |
| Shared SAU Services | Positive but small | Neutral | 2 | Little or none. |
| Lower School/Upper School | Substantial benefits | Neutral | Likely 1 | Shared governance by Cornish and Plainfield voters, transition-related disruption |
| One School | Substantial benefits | Large reduction | Likely 1 | Shared governance by Cornish and Plainfield voters, transition-related disruption, loss of a community focal point |

Recommendations. In light of the potential for substantial benefits with respect to both educational quality and cost reduction, the Committee recommends that the Plainfield community consider the possibility of eventually forming a single school district with Cornish responsible for educating the children of both towns. Such consideration should be approached with both due deliberation and a sense of urgency, will require detailed analysis and scenario development carried out in compliance with state statutes, and is expected to involve a multi-year effort. While we do not at this time endorse the substantial step of forming single school district with Cornish, we believe that there are compelling reasons to further analyze this option. The most feasible body to undertake such analysis would be a School Administrative Unit with joint responsibility for education in Plainfield and Cornish. It seems to us both possible and desirable that formation of a joint SAU with Cornish not involve increased costs borne by Plainfield tax payers and at least initially not involve any change in governance with respect to the policies and expenditures of the two schools. Assuming that these conditions are met, we

recommend that Plainfield proceed to form a joint SAU (as distinct from a joint School district) with Cornish as they have requested. We see such formation as entailing no significant costs or risks while offering positive, although small, educational benefits, and enabling Plainfield to evaluate more far-reaching options down the road that represent potentially positive solutions to challenges driven by declining enrollments.

Respectfully submitted,

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