

Hancock Central School

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To: The Joint Committee on Education
From: Dr. Rebecca Phillips, Superintendent Hancock School District
Re: House Bill 4637 Hancock Exemption
Date: June 5, 2024

Dear Committee Members,

The Hancock School District respectfully requests that the committee support our petition for exemption from Massachusetts General Law Chapter 76, section 12B, subsection (k). The requirements of this statute have a significant and devastating impact on our small rural school.

The Hancock School District is located in the westernmost part of Berkshire County and serves a community of approximately 750 residents. Our elementary program, housed at Hancock Central School, provides instruction to students in Pre-K through 6th grade. Through long-established tuition agreements, our middle and high school students attend either the New Lebanon School District in New York or the Mount Greylock Regional School District (MGRSD) in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Currently, we have an enrollment of 59 elementary students and approximately 40 students in grades 7 through 12.

In September of 2023, after questions arose from a school district within Franklin County, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) sent an email reminding the Hancock School District of its obligation to allow school choice students to transition to MGRSD after completing 6th grade in Hancock. This directive from DESE was based on subsection (k) of the school choice law, which states that any child accepted to attend a public school through the school choice program shall be permitted to remain in that school system until high school graduation, even if the receiving district does not operate a school at the secondary level.

Our tuition contract with the MGRSD is \$17,254 for the Fy '24 school year. The requirement to carry non-resident school choice students into tuitioning grades will have a serious financial impact on the town of Hancock. Although the town would continue to receive the allotted school choice amount of \$5,000 per student, paying the balance of the tuition is an unsustainable requirement. For one student who chooses to attend Hancock and then transitions to the MGRSD, the town would pay out a balance of approximately \$73,500 for their middle and high school education. If all our current students who fall under this statute attend the MGRSD for their middle and high school career, Hancock would be responsible for more than \$580,000 in tuition for non-resident students.

As all small rural schools do, we work closely with neighboring districts to share services and supports and make collaborative efforts to defray overall costs. Considering that the FY '25 approved budget is \$2,026,659, and approximately 50% of that amount is earmarked for tuition

costs, this newly enforced section of the school choice statute will have a long-term negative impact on the financial stability of the school.

Since the inception of the school choice provision, Hancock has opened its doors to non-resident students, expanding class sizes and adding value to the overall educational experience. Our Kindergarten class for next school year is slated to have an enrollment of 4 students. In previous years, we would welcome school choice students to support a well-rounded and robust educational experience for all students. However, with the requirements of subsection (k), and at my recommendation, the school committee recently voted to not participate in the school choice program for the upcoming school year. This decision was not taken lightly as we recognize the value and importance of accepting school choice students into our community. However, this was a necessary step to protect the town from this burdensome financial obligation.

It is a privilege and honor to lead the Hancock School District. I am proud of the teachers, staff, students, and parents for the commitment they have made to the school. I recognize the significant efforts the school committee, selectboard, finance committee, and the community at large have made with the commitment of time and resources to ensure the Hancock District has the support necessary to meet the needs of all our students. The requirement to fund non-resident students beyond the 6th grade threatens the financial stability of the school and ending participation in the school choice program may force us to make difficult decisions that will negatively impact the school and the community.

The Hancock Central School is an integral and vital part of the community, with a long and rich history of providing quality experiences in a nurturing and effective educational environment. The personalized attention, strong community connections, and holistic approach to education make our schools a valuable asset to all.

Again, I strongly urge you to support the Hancock School District's request for exemption from this burdensome requirement.

Respectfully submitted,

Rebecca R. Phillips

Rebecca Phillips, Ed. D
Superintendent of Schools
Hancock School District