

Frequently Asked Questions: Groton School Facilities

The Groton 2020 Plan aims to address aging facilities requiring significant capital investments and expanding educational opportunities for all Groton residents. The plan calls for the construction of a new 169,000 sq. ft. middle school adjacent to the high school. Upon completion of the middle school construction project, two new 86,000 sq. ft. elementary schools will be built at Cutler and West Side. Pleasant Valley, Claude Chester and SB. Butler will be closed.

Over the last few months, a number of community members have raised questions regarding the long-term facilities plan recently approved by the Board of Education. In an effort to help inform the community, the questions are listed below and responses follow each question.

Financial

Did we save money by closing Fitch Middle School?

Yes. Groton School District saved a significant amount of funds through the closing of Fitch Middle School. The administrative staff was reduced, as the positions of principal, assistant principal, and clerical staff were eliminated from the budget. In addition, the operating costs for the building were also eliminated; the Board no longer is required to provide heat, electricity, or utilities to the building. In addition, the custodial and maintenance costs at Fitch Middle School are no longer a part of the school budget.

Why not reopen Fitch Middle School?

Fitch Middle School is in dire need of renovations. The cost would be prohibitive. It has never been fully renovated since constructed in 1928. The building has served as a high school, junior high, middle school, and the D wing is a former elementary school. The site is too small and parking is shared with the Town Hall. Fitch Middle School will be much more useful to the Town in the future to house Town of Groton and the Board of Education administration.

Will reducing the number of schools from ten to eight reduce operating costs?

Yes. It will reduce the number of staff, reduce travel time between schools for staff, and reduce the number of schools to maintain. The reduction in the number of schools will make the remaining eight schools more efficient and allow the district to maintain more appropriate and equitable class sizes among the elementary schools. Potential savings estimates are provided below. It should be noted that these savings do not include grade level instructional staff.

- School buildings average annual maintenance of ~\$134,500/bldg. potentially yields savings of ~\$269,000 annually.
- Potential administrative staff savings of ~\$1.2 million annually
- Total Potential Annual Cost Avoidance: ~\$1.47 million
- Additional Operational staffing efficiency through consolidation to larger schools

Does this proposal address all the needs of the district?

No. At some point in time, Charles Barnum Elementary School and Mary Morrisson Elementary School may need renovation and expansion to be fully functional, code compliant, safe, and meet future educational needs. At Fitch High School, the district will need to address handicap accessibility in the older section, remove sources of non-friable asbestos, provide air conditioning in older classrooms, and renovate older locker rooms and sports facilities.

Project Cost

How much will this project cost?

The estimated total cost for the proposed project will be roughly \$195.6 million dollars for the construction of a new middle school and two new elementary schools, based on current construction costs and a test-fit (not final) designs for the three schools on their sites:

- \$90 million for one new middle school on the Merritt Site
- \$52.9 million to build a new elementary school on the West Side site and demolish the existing middle school
- \$52.7 million to build a new elementary school on the Cutler site and demolish the existing middle school
- *The Town of Groton is seeking special legislation assistance for \$141 million (see below).*

What is the expected state reimbursement?

The 2016 reimbursement rates are as follows:

- New School Construction: 44.29%
- School Renovation: 54.290%

Not all expenses are eligible for reimbursement funds. In total, the Groton 2020 Plan would be eligible for roughly \$76.7 million in reimbursement grants from the state. The Town of Groton would be responsible for the remaining \$119 million dollars of the project.

What is required to get the 80% reimbursement for one of the elementary school projects? An 80% reimbursement grant is available from the School Diversity Grant Eligibility – CGS Sec. 10-286h:

*“School building project grants for diversity schools. (a)(1) The Department of Construction Services, in consultation with the Department of Education, shall provide a school building project grant in accordance with the provisions of this chapter for a diversity school for any local or regional board of education that has one or more schools under the jurisdiction of such board where the proportion of pupils of racial minorities in all grades of the school is **greater than twenty-five per cent of the proportion of pupils of racial minorities in the public schools** in all of the same grades of the school district in which said school is situated taken together, and (2) such board has demonstrated evidence of **a good-faith effort to correct the existing disparity** in the proportion of pupils of racial minorities in the district, as determined by the Commissioner of Education. Such diversity school shall be open to resident students of the school district for the purpose of correcting the existing disparity in the proportion of pupils of racial minorities in the district not later than five years after the opening of the diversity school. For purposes of this section, “pupils of racial minorities” means those whose race is defined as other than white, or whose ethnicity is defined as Hispanic or Latino by the federal Office of Management and Budget for use by the Bureau of Census of the United States Department of Commerce.”*

However, Groton will not be eligible for the School Diversity Grant in 2016. The diversity grant requires that the 25% imbalance occurs in the same year of the construction grant application. Among all elementary schools in the 2015-16 school year, 44.41% of all students are racial and ethnic minorities. Claude Chester Elementary, a K-5 elementary school, is currently at 69.18% minority, or less than one percentage point from crossing the racially imbalanced threshold of 69.99% minority. Catherine Kolnaski Magnet School is also categorized as an impending imbalance at 60.51%, while Northeast Academy Elementary School is a low impending imbalance school at 25.53% minority. Thus, Groton will not be able to use the 80% reimbursement for any school construction projects in 2016.

What is Special Legislation?

Due to the high cost of the facilities project and the low state reimbursement level, the Town is seeking additional financial assistance from the State in the form of special legislation for a one-time school construction grant to Groton

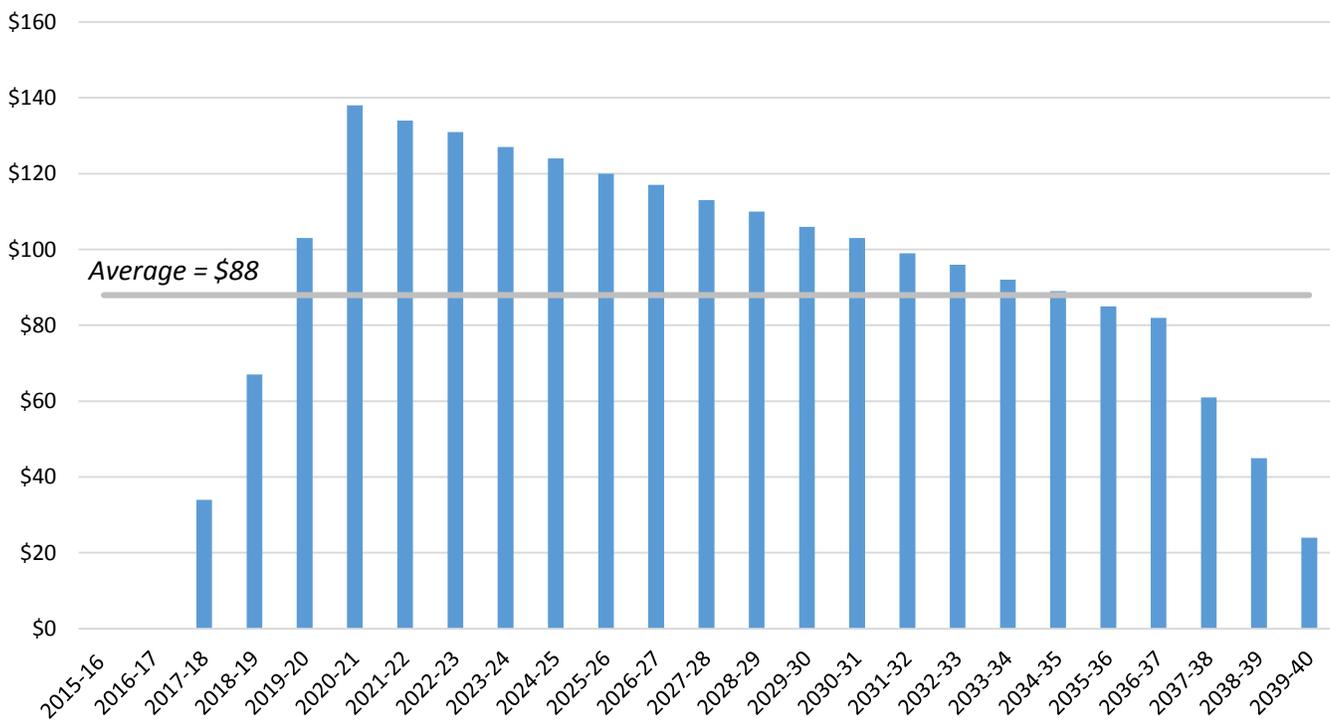
for \$141 million. The Town is currently consulting with the State Division of Construction Services, and the outcome of the special legislation request is anticipated for late spring 2016.

How will Groton pay for the rest?

The SFITF will make recommendations to the Town Council Committee-of-the-Whole (COW) on March 16th for a November referendum to approve issuing bonds to cover the remainder of the construction costs of the Groton 2020 Plan. The principal and interest on the bonds will be repaid over 23 years through increases to the mill rate to pay the cost of the debt service. The total mill rate in any given year will be determined by the total debt service costs of all municipal bonds. Based on the results of a professional public opinion survey, willingness to support the Groton 2020 Plan went up as cost to individual costs to taxpayers went down. Support for the Groton 2020 Plan was greatest at an average of \$150 for the average home owner in Groton per year, reflecting a \$55 million net total cost to Groton.

The precise impact on the average homeowner will vary year to year based on the repayment schedule, starting at \$34 per \$100,000 of assessed value in 2017 to a high of \$138 in 2020, with an average cost of \$88 per year. Based on the median home value of \$247,000 and median assessed value of \$172,900 (properties are assessed and taxed at 70% of market value), this would result in an additional average cost of \$152 to the median homeowner, with a maximum yearly cost of \$239 in 2020. The graph below shows how the annual cost on home assessments will change over time.

Annual Cost on Home Assessment (Per \$100,000 of Assessed Value)



Source: "Town of Groton, CT Pro Forma Debt & Mill Rate Impact: Proposed School Projects - \$55M Net Cost to the Town" by IBIC LLC

Can we include the cost of school demolition in the referendum?

The demolition costs could be included in the referendum; however, those costs would not be reimbursable from the state. The demolition of Cutler and West Side is included in the current project costs. However, the disposition of Claude

Chester, Pleasant Valley, and S.B. Butler are not included in the project costs, as the SFITF has not been charged with determining the end use or possible demolition of these buildings.

If the referendum fails, what will be the cost of maintaining the current facilities?

The chart below summarizes the estimated costs (2012 dollars) for maintaining the identified schools over the next decade. These costs include the removal of non-friable asbestos, replacement of fire alarms and fire sprinklers, replacing heating systems and electrical distribution, handicap accessibility, and other improvements to bring the elementary and middle school buildings up to current building code compliance and life safety goals. This \$55 million total would also need to pass a bond referendum in order to proceed

Summary of Deferred Costs by Building	
Facility: Elementary	Total
Kolnaski	\$137,500
Barnum	\$7,333,750
Morrisson	\$6,773,141
Northeast	\$123,685
Pleasant Valley	\$7,174,597
Chester	\$9,500,000
S.B. Butler	\$10,488,117
Priority Elementary Subtotal	\$27,162,714
Facility: Middle	Total
Cutler	\$12,795,936
West Side	\$15,145,721
Middle Subtotal	\$27,941,657
Total Deferred Costs	\$55,104,371

Will the project move forward without assurance from the state that Groton will receive a construction grant?

The project will not move forward to the design and construction phase without the grant approval from the state.

I'm a homeowner without kids in school in Groton. Why is this plan beneficial to me?

Quality schools add value to the prices of homes within the district. Investment in schools may help Groton to position itself as a desirable place to live as the economy recovers, and help to attract businesses and younger families. Improvements in the condition of the public school system will contribute to an overall increase in the quality of life for all Groton residents. One report from Pennsylvania State University (“Pennsylvania’s Best Investment: The Social and Economic Benefits of Public Education” http://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/BestInvestment_Full_Report_6.27.11.pdf) found that improved education greatly increases tax revenue, “...such as a return of at least 7 dollars for every dollar invested in pre-kindergarten education” (pg. 3).

Location

Why not site the new middle school on the King property adjacent to Catherine Kolnaski Magnet School as planned in 2002 and as presented to the voters as part of the master plan in the successful 2004 referendum?

The King property site is not large enough to accommodate a consolidated middle school.

What was the selection process and criteria for the location? Were there other options?

A two-day stakeholder workshop was conducted in May of 2014. One outcome of the workshop was the concept of developing an educational campus through the construction of a middle school on or adjacent to the high school property. Throughout the summer of 2014, this concept was further discussed and embraced by Groton's Board of Education (BOE) who asked the SFITF to conduct a feasibility assessment. A short-list of other potential sites was developed; however, the campus concept became a central piece of the Groton 2020 plan with the task force moving forward with the Merritt Site.

Cutler Middle School is surrounded by a flood plain. Will this affect any future construction on that site?

The proposed location of the new elementary school is above the elevation for the 500-year flood plain. As an additional precaution, the site will be elevated slightly to provide additional freeboard as a safety margin. Due to the surrounding floodplain, the district will likely need special approval from Planning & Zoning, as well as from the state, to expand the school's footprint in the future.

Can we lease parking during the week from St. Mary's?

We have asked in the past and the answer is no. They need to keep parking available for funerals and other church functions that occur on week days. The church and high school have shared parking for special events in the past.

I thought Merritt Farm was supposed to be used for recreation. What's happening with that under this plan?

The Merritt Site under the Groton 2020 Plan will enhance the overall recreational inventory and opportunities for Groton. In fact, under the proposed plan, the completed project will have 3 rectangular multi-purpose fields, a baseball field, and a softball field. One of the multi-purpose fields is tournament sized with synthetic turf affording greater use over traditional grass surfaces. These fields will be paid for by the project saving the Town money on field construction.

For over a year, the Town has been working with DEEP on land conversion in order for the Merritt property to be utilized for a new middle school. An agreement is expected to be reached by June 2016 at the latest.

The Parks and Rec plan for the Merritt Property includes a trail connection between the Sutton Park facilities, the Merritt property, and then across the street to the Merritt Forest. Will a trail connection be possible through the MS property?

A trail connection was also identified in the Educational Specifications for the proposed Middle School. It is envisioned that a trail can be incorporated to "loop" the school property and ultimately connect to Sutton Park and to Poquonnock Plains Park.

Sports and Recreation at the Middle School

How will one middle school affect sports? Who will they play? Will the middle school be too large to compete locally?

The consolidation of the middle school will reduce the number of interscholastic teams from two teams per sport to one. To compensate for that reduction, the district plans to implement an intramural program that would engage middle school children in a variety of afterschool sports that will expand athletic competition beyond what is available today. In terms of competition with local middle schools, the proposed consolidated school would be approximately the same size as East Lyme Middle School; the size of the school would not prevent the school from competing locally.

Would MS programming after school prevent use of the MS athletic fields by HS athletic teams?

No; however, it will require scheduling between the middle school and high school athletics departments to communicate and coordinate uses as well.

Is there State Department of Education grant money available to build a pool or an artificial turf field?

School construction grants do not include reimbursement for swimming pools. If an artificial turf field was installed at the high school football field, that aspect of the project would not be eligible for reimbursement.

What will be the net change to the number of playing fields at the schools?

Net Change in Playing Fields			
School Site	Reductions	Additions	Net Change
Middle School		2 triangular 3 rectangular	+2 triangular +3 rectangular
Cutler	2 triangular	1 triangular	+1 triangular
	1 rectangular	1 rectangular	+0 rectangular
West Side	1 triangular		-1 triangular
		3 rectangular	+3 rectangular
Total	3 triangular 1 rectangular	3 triangular 7 rectangular	+0 triangular fields +6 rectangular fields

There will be a net addition of 6 rectangular playing fields at the schools.

Racial Balance/Enrollments

What is Racial Balance?

CT General Statutes § 10-226

- Schools whose minority composition varies 15% or more from the district's minority composition for the same grades are impending racial imbalance
- Schools whose minority composition varies 25% or more are racially imbalanced
 - Whenever the State Board of Education finds that racial imbalance exists in a public school, it shall notify in writing the board of education having jurisdiction over said school that such finding has been made.
 - Any board of education receiving notification of the existence of racial imbalance as specified in section 10-226b shall forthwith prepare a plan to correct such imbalance and file a copy of said plan with the State Board of Education.

How will this plan resolve racial balancing into the future?

The plan, which calls for a consolidated middle school, will permanently resolve issues regarding racial balance for children in grades 6- 8. The proposed construction of new elementary schools, each with a magnet school component, will enable the district to achieve racial balance at each of the schools. Children from S. B. Butler Elementary School and many children from Claude Chester Elementary School will be combined at the new Cutler School; projections of this enrollment pattern indicate the racial composition would be close to the district average. Likewise, children from Pleasant Valley Elementary School and the remaining children from Claude Chester Elementary School would attend the new West Side School. Again, projections of this enrollment pattern indicate the racial composition would be close to the district average. Furthermore, the district plans to operate both schools as intra-district magnet schools using a controlled lottery where students would be selected based on the neighborhood elementary school.

Did you project out expected enrollment in Groton schools in the future? What does that look like?

School enrollment projections have been estimated for the Groton Public School System out to the 2024-25 school year, and predicted a continued decline in enrollments. Enrollments for Groton School District have been steadily declining from 2002 (5,719 students) until 2014 (4,564 students). These enrollments occurred during a time of largely static population and labor force. The enrollment trends are reflective of a period with an overall decline in births in the Groton School District, as well as the increasing popularity of other regional magnet school options. Preliminary data from Groton Public Schools suggests that enrollments in New London magnet schools have increased from 29 students in the 2011-12 school year to 180 students in 2015-16. Parents of Kindergarten students may now be starting to enroll their children in NLPS rather than sending them to private or parochial schools in the area. The increasing popularity of LEARN and New London School Magnet offerings will continue to impact enrollments at Groton Public Schools.

Based on these conditions, the Groton School District Comprehensive Enrollment Analysis projected PreK-12 enrollment out to 2019-20. Elementary school enrollments are projected to average approximately 2,420 students over the next five years, while the middle school average 920 students. However it's important to note that these projections could be impacted by changes in the Groton Public School facilities and offerings, especially by actions that make enrollment in GPS more desirable than enrollment in the New London Magnet Schools.

What about racial imbalance at the elementary schools?

Racial imbalance is a consideration of the Groton 2020 Plan. Groton, like much of the region, is becoming increasingly diverse; however, in Groton this diversity is not equally distributed throughout the community. Assuming that recent trends continue into the near future, the district-wide minority enrollment will continue to increase by an estimated 1.48% per year. This presents a moving target for racial balance goals, with school enrollments of minorities required to remain within 25 percentage points of the district average. This poses a significant challenge for developing school facility plans. The two new 600-student elementary schools are planned to have both local neighborhood boundaries as well as magnet/choice components. By having a significant choice/magnet component, students from all over Groton may choose to attend either one of these schools. The flexibility provided by this type of learning environment can provide long-term compliance with state mandates and eliminate the need for further redistricting.

Why doesn't the district hire a lawyer to fight the unfunded State mandate to balance the district?

The State mandate requiring racial balance in public schools reflects both federal and state law. The Board of Education has a responsibility to provide free and appropriate public education to all children in Groton in an equitable manner.

What is our backup plan?

If the referendum fails, the Board of Education and School Facilities Task Force members would reconvene to develop an alternative plan to meet the needs of the middle school students, to ensure racial balance in all schools, and to address the deteriorating conditions of the existing school buildings.

Elementary Schools

We keep abandoning/closing schools and nothing gets done with them. What about that?

In summary, of the seven school facilities that have been closed and turned over to the Town since the mid-1990s, two have been sold, two have been leased, one school building is in the process of being demolished and will remain in Town ownership, one school has been mothballed awaiting an improvement in market conditions so it can be sold, and one school is slated to be turned into a new Town Hall/municipal complex.

Why close three operating elementary schools? What is wrong with what we have?

This is a valid question to many who are not familiar with operating costs and the condition of these schools. School facilities staff have developed a list of deficiencies for each school, and the analysis indicates that the cost of bringing the schools into compliance would be excessive. The required upgrades would include life safety codes, making the buildings energy efficient, complying with handicap accessibility codes, upgrading outdated and worn out building systems, and expanding each school to provide appropriate educational and support spaces. Surveys done in the past indicate that each school needs to be renovated as new and the cost to do so would be more than is practical.

What will become of Pleasant Valley Elementary School, Claude Chester Elementary School, and S. B. Butler Elementary School should they close?

Once the Board of Education votes to close the three elementary schools, the facilities would be turned over to the Town for possible use as recreation areas or for economic development. Because Pleasant Valley may be in a commercial zone, it could be sold for that purpose. Both the Claude Chester and S. B. Butler properties could be converted for use as community parks; having both properties converted as playing fields would address the community desire for additional parks.

Why do we want to build elementary schools at West Side Middle School and Cutler Middle School?

Both West Side and Cutler Middle School sites can accommodate construction of new elementary school while the site is currently occupied by middle school students. Both sites are well located to serve the current and future school population and future use as a school meshes with the character and uses of the area. The new construction will also provide developmentally appropriate classrooms for young children and enable the district to expand preschool education.

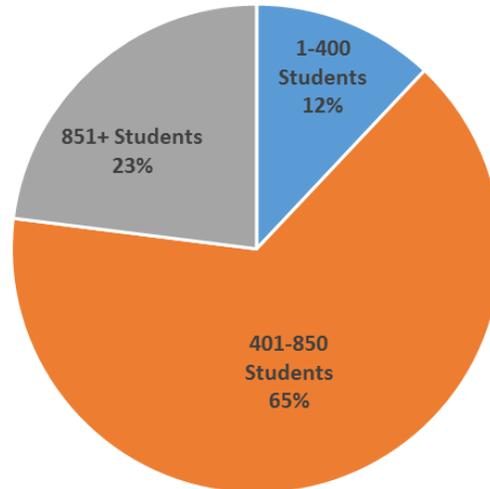
Proposed Building and Building Size

The size of the consolidated middle school has raised concerns from parents and community members. Is the proposed middle school too large and will educational results will be affected?

In proposing a middle school of approximately 900 students, the staff conducted a search for other middle schools of similar size in Connecticut. The list that follows identifies the middle schools in Connecticut with enrollments ranging from 850 students to 1,300 students. Many of the schools listed below are considered some of the finest schools in our state.

Connecticut Middle Schools		
Student Enrollment: 850+		
School District	School	Enrollment
East Lyme	East Lyme Middle School	873
Fairfield	Roger Ludlowe Middle School	892
Brookfield	Whisconier Middle School	917
Glastonbury	Smith Middle School	940
Danbury	Rogers Park Middle School	1,002
West Hartford	Sedgwick Middle School	1,014
West Hartford	King Philip Middle School	1,066
Danbury	Broadview Middle School	1,085
Darien	Middlesex Middle School	1,162
Branford	Francis Walsh Intermediate	1,197
New Canaan	Saxe Middle School	1,310

The chart to the right indicates that approximately one quarter of the middle schools in Connecticut are approximately the same size as the proposed middle school.



Why have we included a double lecture hall in the middle school plan?

This was provided as an option for the programmatic test-fit, and any design of the auditorium has yet to be determined. The architectural consultants have presented an option for a 350 seat auditorium with dividers which would allow the hall to be separated into two 175 seat lecture halls. In addition, a divider would also separate the stage from the auditorium seating; this would allow for three instructional spaces when the auditorium is not being fully used. The lecture halls would be used as instructional spaces for multiple class presentations for middle school students. In addition, since the school will be in close proximity to the high school, the lecture halls would be available for use by high school classes.

The new wing of the High School had classrooms sized at 650 sq. ft. Why are the new MS classrooms sized at 800 sq. ft.? The MS kids are smaller than HS students. Why do they need more room?

Space standards vary by grade and are generally inversely proportional to grade and age of the student. Pre K and Kindergarten classrooms typically require the most space, at 1,000 sq. ft.

How did you decide what to include in the building and what not to include?

Educational Specifications developed for each of the three school projects provided the programming and space specifications for each building. The educational specifications were developed through stakeholder involvement and input from administration/staff, and adopted by the Groton Board of Education.

Education

What are the other benefits of combined middle schools?

A Single Middle School provides the following benefits:

- Early integration and parity
- Consolidated resources
- Improved district operational efficiency; better use of fiscal resources
- One less facility to maintain
- Students have more choices in regards to academic and after-school activities
- Greater opportunity for teacher collaboration
- Opportunity for a community center for middle school students
- Avoid split teams
- Stable class size with larger grade cohorts
- Need for redistricting eliminated

- Ability to expand programs
- Better space utilization
- Easier to address security
- Bigger core facilities, i.e. auditorium and cafeteria, and the opportunity to leverage State funding for larger core facilities

What is an IB middle school program? Why would we want to consider pursuing that in Groton?

The IB Middle Years Program is a five-year program for students age 11-16 (generally grades 6-10). Its curricula differs from standard middle school programming. Middle Years IB requires at least 50 hours of teaching time for each of 8 subject groups in each year of the program. Subject groups include: language acquisition, language and literature, individuals and societies, sciences, mathematics, arts, physical and health education, and design. In years 4 and 5, students have the option to take courses from six of the eight subject groups within certain limits, to provide greater flexibility in meeting local requirements and individual student learning needs. Each year, students engage in at least one collaboratively planned interdisciplinary unit that involves at least two subject groups. IB Middle Years students also complete a long-term project, where they decide what they want to learn about, identify what they already know, discover what they will need to know to complete the project, and create a proposal or criteria for completing it.

Is this plan forward thinking about the possibility of state-wide all-day preschool in the future?

Yes. Even though the state initiatives for universal Pre K may be a number of years out, the Groton 2020 Plan is ensuring that there is flexibility for this initiative. Once completed, there will be space gained to provide some level of Pre K programming at each elementary with 60 seats planned at each of the new elementary schools.

Safety

Is the existing non-friable asbestos in Pleasant Valley Elementary School, Claude Chester Elementary School, S. B. Butler Elementary School, Cutler Middle School, West Side Middle School, Fitch High School, and the Administration building dangerous?

The non-friable asbestos is not considered dangerous; however, the State Department of Education is concerned about asbestos in schools because over time it may become damaged and pose a potential health risk. The asbestos referred to is contained in floor tile. As long as the asbestos remains in good condition and we continue to use non-abrasive methods of cleaning the floors, the district is not in violation. The school Board's comprehensive asbestos abatement plan is documented in the Capital Improvement Plan.

Is it safe for middle school students to be next door to high school students?

Yes. The campuses will be separated, and the starting and closing times of the schools will be different. There is no reason to believe middle school students will come into contact with high school students unsupervised.

Portable Classrooms

Was the money spent on portable classrooms in 2011 wasted?

Due to budget restraints and a decreasing middle school enrollment, closing Fitch Middle School became necessary. The only way to move students from Fitch Middle School to West Side Middle School and Cutler Middle School without overcrowding classrooms and limiting programs was to add classroom space. Using portable classrooms was a cost effective way to enable closing Fitch Middle School.

What will become of the six new portable classrooms at the current middle schools?

What are the next steps in this process?

The SFITF will make the recommendation to the Town Council Committee-of-the-Whole (COW) on March 16th, 2016 for a November referendum. In late spring of 2016, the outcome of Groton's request for special legislation for \$141 million will determine the net cost to Groton residents. The Town will also complete the Application for School Construction Grant to the State in June 2016. If the voters of Groton pass the referendum to approve the bonding required to move forward in November 2016, the Groton 2020 Plan will begin construction activities in the summer of 2017.