

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 renovation as new. 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.

Does this proposal address all the needs of the district?

No. Charles Barnum Elementary School and Mary Morrisson Elementary School will need renovation and expansion to be fully functional, code compliant, safe, etc. 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.

How much will this project cost?

How is Groton paying for this?

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.

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

The following are the estimated costs for maintaining the identified schools over the next six years:

SCHOOL	COST
Claude Chester Elementary School	\$6,600,000
S. B. Butler Elementary School	\$3,543,000
Pleasant Valley Elementary School	\$4,480,000
West Side Middle School	\$5,547,000
Cutler Middle School	\$6,647,000
TOTAL	\$26,817,000

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.

Will there be two referendums? How much will it cost the taxpayers? What is the current debt load for the town?

What is the maximum cost to pay off the bond per \$100,000 property value, in what year does this occur?

What is the expected state reimbursement? What is required to get the 80% reimbursement for one of the elementary school renovations?

The 2015 reimbursement rates are as follows:

- New School Construction: 48.57%
- School Renovation: 58.57%
- The 80% comes 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.

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 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 BOE who charged 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.

I have issues with the location. Did you consider the environment? Did you plan for the traffic implications this would bring to the area?

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.

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.

The Parks and Rec plan for the Merritt Property include 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?

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.

If a turf field is built at the MS, how will the field be controlled so that the turf is not damaged?

Racial Balance/Enrollments

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 renovation of the existing middle schools into prek-5 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 newly renovated 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 newly renovated 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 242 students in 2014-15. 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 by 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, 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 school district boundaries as well as magnet/choice components. By having a significant choice 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?

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 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 convert West Side Middle School and Cutler Middle School to elementary schools?

Once the consolidated middle school is constructed, both West Side and Cutler Middle Schools would be excellent facilities to be renovated to serve prekindergarten through grade 5 children. Since Claude Chester Elementary School has been identified as racially imbalanced, the district staff believe that the reimbursement rate to fully renovate Cutler into an elementary school would be 80%. The renovations will also provide developmentally appropriate classrooms for young children and enable the district to expand preschool education.

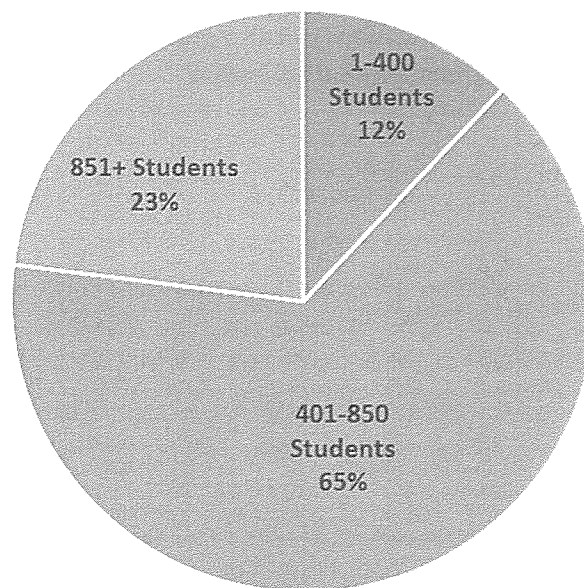
Proposed Building and Building Size

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 below 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?

The architectural consultants have recommended 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 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?

Mike Graner

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.

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. 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?

They may be used in their current location or used to replace the aging 1992 portables located at Charles Barnum Elementary School and Mary Morrisson Elementary School until the Town is able to address space issues there.

Busing

How long will middle school students, especially sixth graders, be on the bus as compared to current bus runs?

The bus runs calculated for students to attend the new middle school adjacent to the high school would be approximately the same length as the current bus system on average.

Will the cost of busing change?

The current fleet of buses will be used; no additional expense is anticipated.

Planning Process

Who's on the school planning task force? How did it come to be?

The task force is comprised of members from the following: Board of Education, RTM, Teachers, Citizens at large, School Administrators, Town Council, Planning Commission, and the Permanent School Building Committee. The task force was established by the Town Council on 8/6/2012 along with appointments of original membership.

Can this project be done in phases?

Due to the nature of this construction program, for both local approval and construction it requires a single a referendum and plan. However, school construction will be done in phases since the elementary school construction is contingent on the completion of the consolidated middle school. See preliminary timeline below.

Scenario 2	2017												2018												2019												2020																								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12													
Build One New 6-8 Middle School on Merritt Site (938 Student Enrollment)																																																													
Build One New PreK-5 Elementary School on West Side Site and Demo Existing West Side MS (600 Enrollment)																																																		Site Construction											
Build One New PreK-5 Elementary School on Cutler Site and Demo Existing Cutler MS (600 Enrollment)																																																		Site Construction											

Why is now the time to do this?

There are various factors at play making this the right time for the Groton 2020 Plan. First, the town is faced with significant maintenance and repairs needs at S.B. Butler, Pleasant Valley, Claude Chester, Cutler Middle School, and West Side Middle School. These critical repairs total \$54 million over the next decade, with nearly \$27 million requiring attention in the next 6 years at these schools alone. Additionally, the consolidated middle school and magnet programming at the two new elementary schools are critical components to Groton Public Schools long-term diversity plan and attaining a diversity grant status. Diversity grant status provides 80% reimbursement for an elementary school construction project which translates into an estimated \$16 million dollars reduction in net cost to the town.

The ability to expand educational offerings in the midst of a magnet school explosion in the region are also key factors to the timing. A rapidly growing number of Groton students are voting with their feet and opting out of Groton schools to attend programming elsewhere. Continued erosion of Groton students is detrimental to Groton’s educational system, financial bottom line, attractiveness to new residents, and to the cohesiveness of the school community.

What are the next steps in this process?