

HIGH BRIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT

HIGH BRIDGE MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Welcome and Purpose

The High Bridge Board of Education is dedicated to providing the best possible education for our students while being mindful of the financial impact on our community. This document is meant to inform and engage our community about important discussions regarding the future of our schools. Our goal is to ensure that students receive a high-quality education in a supportive environment while also considering ways to manage costs efficiently.

About the High Bridge Board of Education

The High Bridge Board of Education consists of seven elected members who serve without compensation. Each member lives in High Bridge and has personal experience with our school system, either as a parent or a former parent. While we come from diverse backgrounds, we share a common goal: to make decisions that benefit our students and community. At times, board members may have access to confidential information, such as legal or negotiation matters, which can influence decisions but cannot always be publicly disclosed.

Evaluating Educational Opportunities

For over a decade, the Board has been exploring different ways to enhance educational opportunities for our students. This includes considering shared services, potential mergers, and regionalization options. Our primary focus is to expand and improve academic programs while being mindful of the financial implications for our taxpayers. We also recognize that strong neighborhood schools contribute to property values, and closing a school would be costly to reverse due to state and local regulations.

We have engaged in discussions with several districts in the North Hunterdon-Voorhees sending area, but there has been little interest in a full K-8 merger. We have also looked at becoming a receiving district, where another District will pay us to accept their students. An important consideration is that we also now receive funding for five preschool classes, which not all neighboring districts offer. Additionally, we have existing partnerships to share resources such as administrators, teachers, and business office personnel. We also collaborate on purchasing electricity, classroom supplies, educational materials, and professional development which reduces our costs.

Current Considerations

One of the main discussions in recent years has been the possibility of sending our 5th-8th grade students to another district and closing the Middle School. This option is being evaluated in terms of educational benefits, financial impact, and long-term sustainability. As of this writing, we have not found a suitable partner to entrust some of our children to.

School Budget and Financial Impact

High Bridge has experienced a loss of over \$700,000 in annual state funding over the past several years, which represents approximately 10% of the district's budget. Unlike municipal taxes, which fluctuate with property values, school budget increases are limited to 2% per year unless a referendum is held. Additionally, debt from a 1996 voter-approved referendum will be paid off in 2026, leading to a tax decrease in the 2027 budget.

The overall percentage increases in the last 5 years for the District are:

2021 - **+2.68%** - Equal to \$8.00 per month on a \$227,736.89 average home value.
2022 - **+1.84%** - Equal to \$7.57 per month on a \$229,604.51 average home value.
2023 - **+1.89%** - Equal to \$3.94 per month on a \$232,656.43 average home value.
2024 - **+1.87%** - Equal to \$9.72 per month on a \$260,416.69 average value home value.
2025 - **+1.92%** - Equal to \$12.84 per month on a \$334,815.46 average home value.

The District tax rate for each of the budget years is as follows:

2022 - 2.1289
2023 - 2.1212
2024 - 1.9400
2025 - 1.5549

Special Education Costs

High Bridge has a strong Special Education program that serves 42 students in grades 5-8. The cost to educate these students in our district is approximately \$1.52 million, with no transportation costs. If these students were educated in another district, the cost would exceed \$2.57 million plus transportation expenses. Our program has attracted families to the area and saved taxpayers millions of dollars.

If we were to send our 5th-8th graders to another district, transportation costs would become a factor. Estimates suggest we would need four buses, costing approximately a total of \$240,000 per year, not including potential costs for sports and special education transportation. Students may also face long bus rides, ranging from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the location and number of stops.

State and Regionalization Considerations

New Jersey has been advocating for regionalization and has offered funding for feasibility studies, though with certain conditions. The state announced program prefers K-12 mergers with districts that would total at least 2,000 students. However, the local high schools, North Hunterdon and Voorhees, are already regional schools, and North Hunterdon-Voorhees has stated they are not interested in further mergers or expansion to K-12.

It is important to note that previous regionalization efforts in Hunterdon County did not result in tax reductions and, in some cases, led to increased costs for some districts. Important to understand is that exiting a regional agreement is a lengthy and expensive legal process. For example, Lebanon's attempt to withdraw from an agreement with Clinton Township resulted in years of costly legal battles.

Local Impact and Community Considerations

High Bridge has a strong school culture, with over 90% of students participating in extracurricular activities. A larger school environment could impact student opportunities for sports, clubs, and other programs, potentially leading to more competition for participation. Additionally, staff changes would be necessary, which could affect new teachers being laid off, teacher placement, staff morale, instructional continuity and classroom sizes.

Local control over education is also a key concern. Currently, High Bridge residents elect their own Board of Education and have a say in district policies, superintendent selection, and overall direction of our educational system. In a regionalized system, High Bridge would have a fraction of the board seats and less decision-making power over education policies affecting our students. In some cases, our representation could be combined with another town's, reducing our ability to advocate for our community's specific needs.

If High Bridge regionalized, we would no longer be able to offer free preschool within the district. We have one of the most successful and well attended preschool programs in the area.

Another consideration is that a send-receive agreement could mean partnering with a district that feeds into North Hunterdon High School instead of Voorhees High School. That could create additional challenges for student transitions, curriculum, etc..

What happens to the Middle School once it is closed? Can we sell it? What becomes of it? A nursing home? Apartments? So many possibilities exist. Also be aware that once a school is closed, for example our Middle School, in order to reopen it, it would have to be aligned with the current Borough and State codes. Bringing the Middle School up to today's code is very unlikely due to the extraordinary costs.

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Conclusion

The Board wants the public to understand how we are constantly reevaluating our options, and will continue to look at all options, including the finances/taxes here in High Bridge. The Board remains committed to making decisions that prioritize student learning while being fiscally responsible. We encourage community engagement and value your input as we continue these important discussions about the future of High Bridge schools. Our goal is to provide the best possible education for our students while preserving the close-knit community feel that makes our schools unique. If you have any comments, questions, or input, please speak with the Superintendent or attend the School Board meetings. Other avenues have shown to not be reliable and have spread misinformation.

The Members of the High Bridge Board of Education

Karyn Gove - (President)
Caitlin Bowring
Michael McCasland
Cynthia Sharkey

Robert Imhoff - (Vice-President)
Gregory Hodges
Colleen Poles