

Community Presentation on the Proposal to Close Mark's Meadow

April 23, 2009

The State of Our Schools – Enrollment and Economics

We currently educate 1327 children (K to 6) in four elementary schools. The schools range in size from 194 (Mark's Meadow) to 462 (Fort River). The present enrollment reflects a decrease of approximately 300 students over the ten-year period since 1999. Fifteen years ago, there were approximately 1800 students in the elementary district. For FY10 and FY11, projections estimate elementary enrollment at between 1300 and 1310 students, possibly increasing by 50 students by FY14. Since we are facing serious, multi-year economic and funding issues, consideration has been given to closing an elementary school, and a motion was made at the March 17, 2009 Amherst School Committee meeting to close Mark's Meadow School no later than June 30, 2010. This motion is scheduled for a vote at the May 19, 2009 School Committee meeting, giving us one year to plan if the motion is approved. Under normal circumstances, which include level funding and stable enrollments, district leaders would not necessarily consider closing a school. Economic circumstances combined with declining district enrollment, have led to the current motion to close Mark's Meadow School.

Factors to Consider:

- Capacity - Our current buildings, including Mark's Meadow, have a capacity of 78 classrooms, 19 (not including preschool) at Crocker Farm, 24 at Fort River, 12 at Mark's Meadow (including the modulars), and 23 at Wildwood. Sixty-nine are presently in use as K-6 classroom space. Our current four-school configuration varies significantly in enrollment and number of classrooms.
- Equity – As shown in Figure 1 on Page 2 of this report, the schools vary considerably in terms of the percent of children enrolled in the free/reduced price lunch program. At Wildwood, 23% of the children receive free/reduced lunch, compared to 55% of those at Crocker Farm (and 29% at Fort River and 38% at Mark's Meadow). The number of students receiving free/reduced lunch at Crocker Farm increased by 9 percent for FY09 over FY08 and increased by 17% over the past five years. Over the same period of time – five years – the percentage of students at the other three schools participating in the free/reduced lunch program remained fairly stable, with fluctuations of -4% to +5%. When considering these statistics, it is important to note that the pre-school enrollment at Crocker Farm is not included; this is a district program which serves all eligible students in Amherst.
- Class Sizes – Given our current and anticipated student population, operating four K-6 schools causes class sizes to vary significantly both within and across schools (as shown in Figure 3). For example, in the current fifth grade, Crocker Farm has a class of 15, whereas Fort River has a class of 25. Similarly, in the fourth grade, Mark's Meadow has a class of 25, whereas Fort River has a class of 18.
- Operating Efficiency - As noted above, the current classroom configuration does not provide class-size flexibility, which means we use more classrooms and hire more teachers than we would need to if we could more efficiently distribute our students. With a three-school model, we could distribute the same number of students across 64 classrooms instead of 69 without going beyond current classroom class-size maximum targets. We would have fewer fifteen-student classes because we anticipate having enough students in each school to reduce this type of under enrollment. Because of the historical limit of 10 classrooms, coupled with its traditional kindergarten enrollment of 20 – 25 students, Mark's Meadow has not been able to accommodate all of the kindergarteners assigned to its geographic area in a single classroom, so "overflow" kindergarteners have been bused to other schools. In subsequent years, those students may return to Mark's Meadow or may choose to remain at the school to which they were originally assigned. In addition, our current organizational model requires four sets of support staff teams

(principal, secretary, nurse, librarian, custodian, etc.). The district has endeavored to hire full-time staff to support the population at Mark's Meadow, even though the building capacity and enrollment might not warrant such staffing. This has been done to attract and maintain staff over time and to foster a sense of community within the school. Presently, and for many years, Mark's Meadow utilized all 10 classrooms. Based on projections for FY10, just nine Mark's Meadow classrooms are needed for the existing and incoming student population.

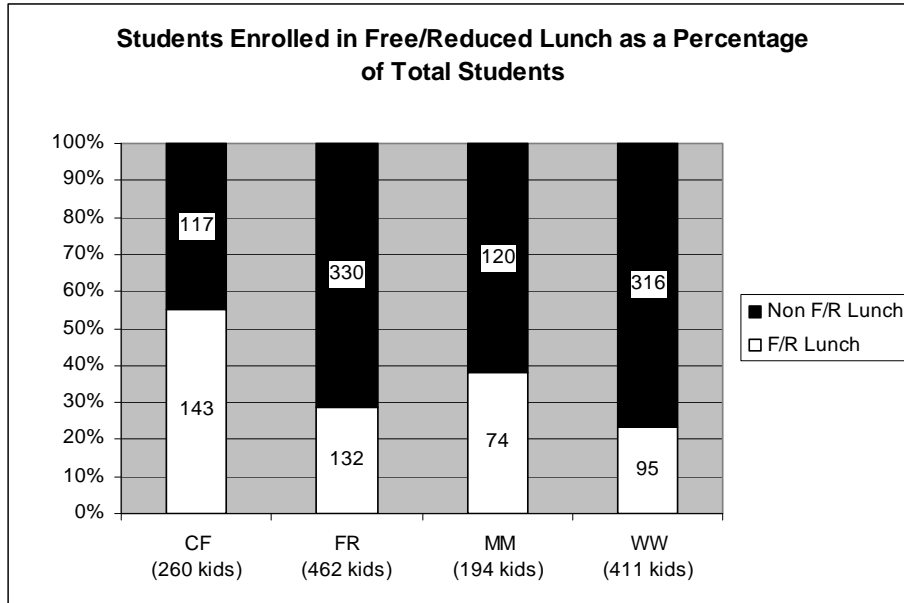


Figure 1. The percentage of students enrolled in Free/Reduced Lunch relative to the total students in each building.

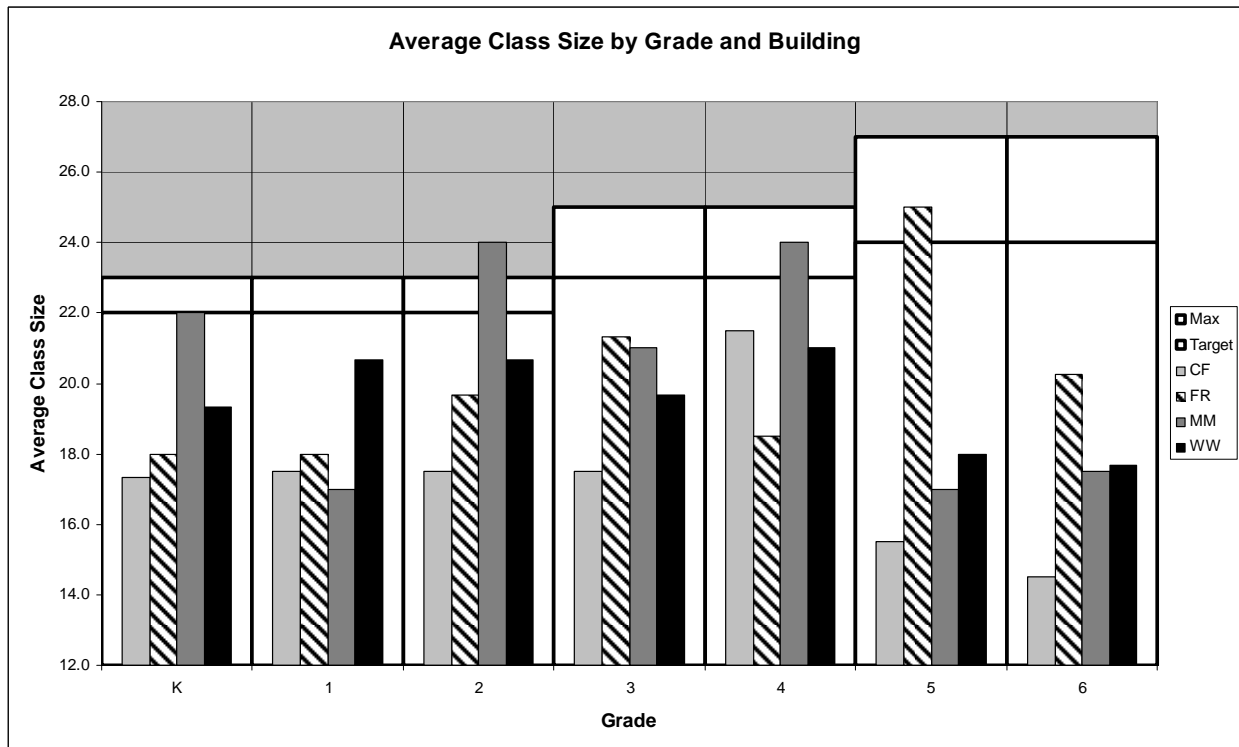


Figure 2. Comparison of the schools' average class sizes by grade. The class size targets and maximums are also shown. (Please note the vertical axis scale starts at twelve.)

The State of Our Schools – The Funding Gap

The Facilitation of the Community Choices Committee (FCCC) report from the fall of 2008 concluded that Amherst faces a serious and growing budget gap between projected revenues and the cost of providing the current level of municipal, school, and library services. If State aid remains constant, the budget shortfall is approximately \$2.66 million in FY2010, rising to \$10.2 million in FY2014. If State aid decreases by 15% next year, as it has in previous economic downturns, then the budget gap will be approximately \$5.2 million in FY2010 (see graph below, Figure 4. The full report can be found at the following web address: <http://www.amherstma.gov/index.asp?NID=802>).

History and Projections of Total Town Revenue and Expenditures

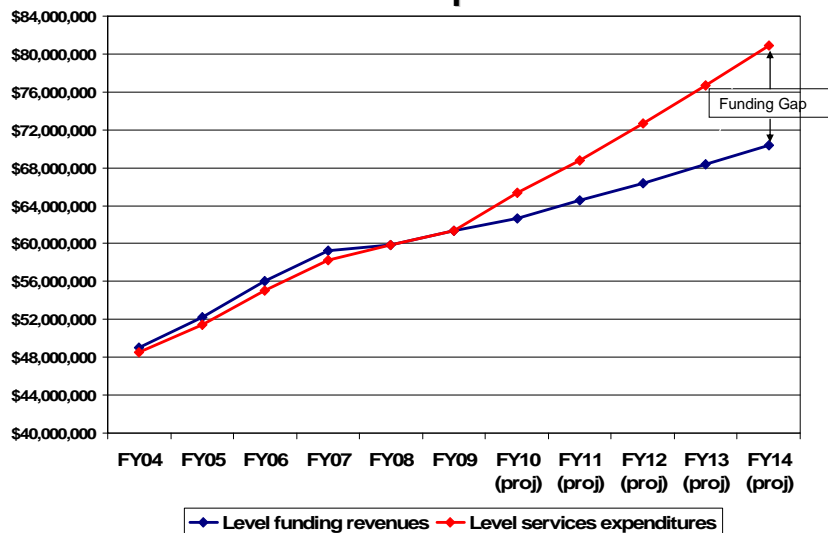


Figure 3. History and Projections of Total Town Revenue and Expenditures.

Unfortunately, even the grim scenario demonstrated above is better than our present reality. Current expectations are that Amherst faces a \$6.3 million dollar gap for next year – FY10 – which is almost \$1 million dollars worse than the chart above indicates – with an increasing gap in years beyond FY10.

The FCCC report notes that the budget gap for the next five years is of such magnitude that substantial cutbacks and restructuring will be required. Because personnel costs accounted for 86% of Amherst’s spending in fiscal year 2009 (and about 80% of school costs), finding a way to limit the growth in personnel-related costs to a sustainable rate is therefore essential to the overall fiscal stability of the town. The FCCC suggested four methods: a) continuing to make savings on employee health insurance plan design, b) restricting future COLAs, c) reducing staffing, and d) implementing some combination of the previous three. Although the school district will work on both (a) and (b), it is also clear that significant staff reductions will also be necessary in order to limit growth in personnel-related costs to a sustainable rate. In sum, the structural deficit between what we receive from the town (based on taxes and state aid) and what it costs to run our schools is an on-going problem, meaning that we are and will continue to be choosing which programs and services to cut.

A Proposal: Moving to Three Schools

The school committee is currently considering a proposal to address a portion of the immediate and systemic budget problems by closing an elementary school (Mark's Meadow) and redistricting all elementary children into the remaining three schools. In addition to remediating some of the budgetary issues, this proposal will also address the systemic issue of socioeconomic inequity amongst the schools. This is a challenging endeavor, both in practical and emotional terms. Among the four schools, Mark's Meadow is the only possible candidate for closure because it is the smallest by eleven classrooms. Mark's Meadow is also the oldest of the four schools, is not owned by the town, and has higher administrative costs per student than the other three schools, due to its size. Mark's Meadow is also a successful school, long serving our North Amherst neighborhoods and families from the campus of the University of Massachusetts campus. However difficult it may be, financial constraints and enrollments have forced us to consider closing Mark's Meadow as an option.

If it is decided by the Amherst School Committee to close Mark's Meadow School, district administration will immediately work on a detailed plan for this major restructuring, establishing multiple, single-purpose teams to address the following:

- Redistricting – A concrete plan will be developed with consultants to establish new school zones within the next few months. School administrators have run preliminary numbers on this proposed change, and have developed two sample redistricting proposals, which are attached at the end of this report
- Student Support – District and school leaders will create a plan to support the educational and emotional needs of students making school transitions.
- Staff Support – A district plan will be developed to redesign building staffing to minimize disruption to students making transitions and to thoughtfully reassign Mark's Meadow staff.
- Moving – A staged, year-long plan for relocation of educational materials, furniture and fixtures to other district locations will be developed and implemented..

In 2007, a demographics study of our schools and their capacity was conducted by NESDEC. While NESDEC does not take a position on local redistricting efforts, their report findings will help guide our process moving forward. Projections are also done annually at the district level, and the NESDEC projections are consistent with what the district projects. However, our enrollments and enrollment projections indicate that educating all K-6 elementary students in a three-building model is feasible for FY11 and beyond and is within the capacity of the schools. Based on our preliminary information, the following figures show how the resulting three schools might look in terms of socioeconomic equity and class sizes (see Figures 4 and 5 respectively).

If the motion to close Mark's Meadow School for FY11 passes, the district will work with consultants to ensure we are moving forward constructively and that we are not overlooking any factors that must be considered. This consultant will analyze and finalize our preliminary work on redistricting to ensure we are doing this work in an educationally sound and equitable manner. The two preliminary plans in the Appendix demonstrate options for redistricting within the parameters established by the motion.

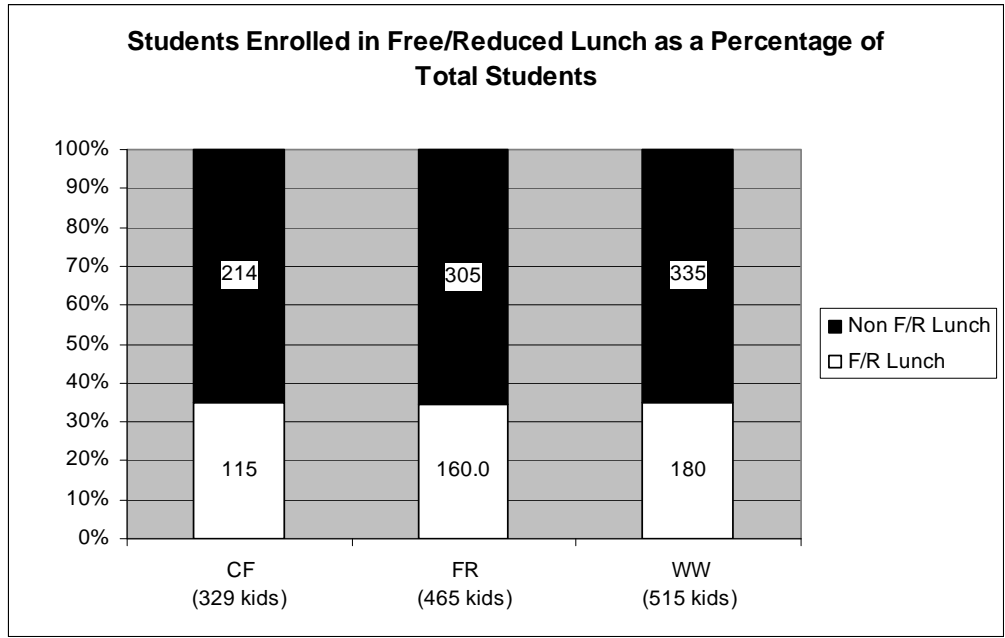


Figure 4. The projected percentage of students enrolled in Free/Reduced Lunch relative to the total students in each building for the 2010-2011 school year (see Rendition 2 in the Appendix for details).

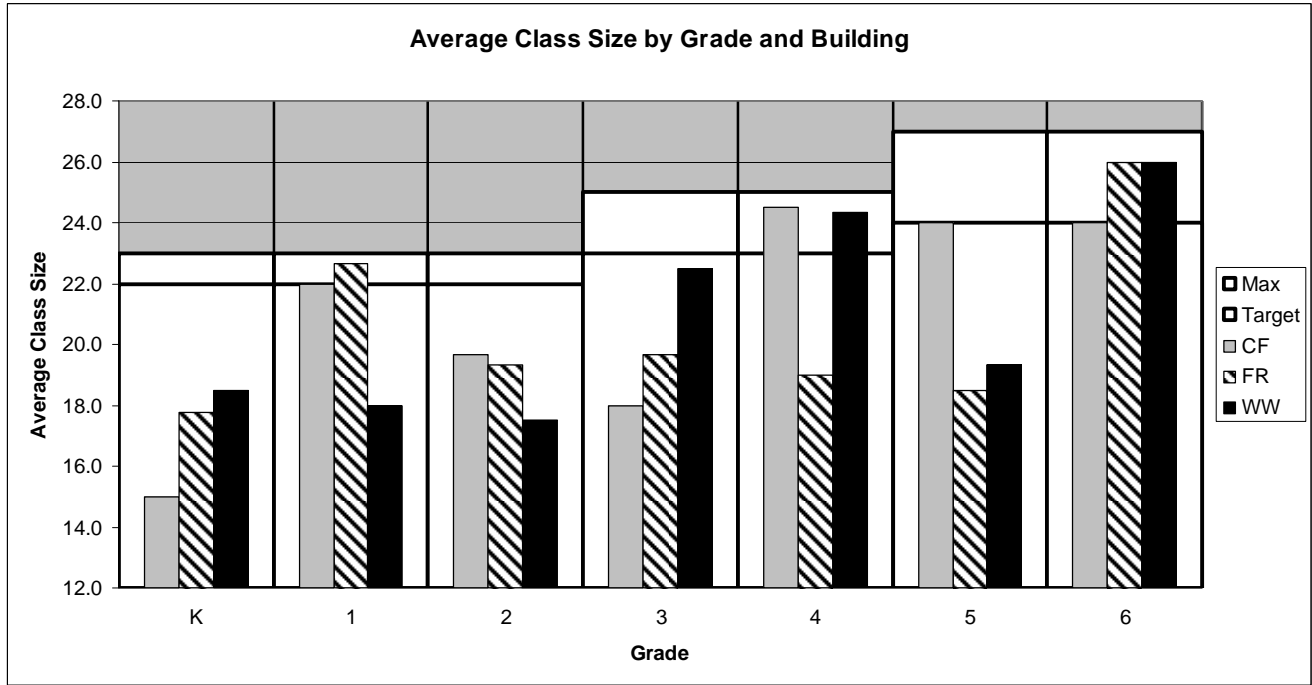


Figure 5. Comparison of the schools' average class sizes by grade projected for the 2010-2011 school year. The class size targets and maximums are also shown. (Please note the vertical axis scale starts at twelve.)

- Equity – As Figure 4 demonstrates, the proportion of children receiving free/reduced lunch would be decidedly more balanced amongst the schools. The schools percentage of students on free/reduced lunch would range from 33.8% to 35.7%. This is a significantly smaller gap (1.9% among schools) than our current system (32%). Why balance for equity? Quoting from the Amherst Schools Organization Report from 2008, “The ASOC looked at research on impact of concentrations of poverty on school effectiveness majority low-income schools face disproportionate challenges in generating student achievement was seen as compelling.” The Committee noted this issue of equity has relevance for our community in many ways, including the challenges that this type of economic disparity creates when children from such schools are joined together in the middle school for Grade 7. The full report of the ASOC can be found at: <http://www.arps.org/node/453>
- Class numbers and sizes –Moving to three elementary schools would result in a need for fewer classrooms (because of the efficiencies involved in dividing students across three schools instead of four). We would need an estimated 63 or 64 classrooms rather than the 69 we are using in FY09. Originally we planned on needing 69 classrooms for FY10, however, there are 2 classrooms on the anticipated cut list. See Figure 7.
- Financial savings – Moving from four to three schools would result in an initial estimated savings of \$532,000 and a reduction in the rate of growth of the budget in subsequent years, thus reducing the slope of the Level Services Expenditures line in Figure 3 These savings would be achieved as follows:

Reductions

o Reduction in district classrooms from 67 (FY10) to 64 (FY11)	\$162,000
o Reduction of principal and 2 secretaries	\$170,000
o 2.5 custodians	\$55,000
o 1.0 ELL teacher	\$54,000
o 1.0 Special Education teacher	\$54,000
o 1.0 Intervention teacher	\$54,000
o 1.13 paraprofessionals	\$15,000
o 1.0 LPN	\$35,000
o 1.0 librarian	\$54,000
o 1.0 IA paraprofessional	\$20,000
Total Reductions	\$673,000

Initial Costs

o Annual transportation increase (an ongoing expense)	\$16,000
o Moving and packing (a one-time expense)	\$70,000
o Prep day for all teachers (a one-time expense)	\$55,000
Total Costs	\$141,000

Thus, the estimated net Year 1 savings is: \$532,000

Notes: There may be further savings achieved by the ability to more efficiently deliver services to Special Education students, English Language Learner students, and others. The estimate above is conservative; there may be an additional savings of \$100,000 to \$200,000. At this time no determination has been made about the status of the two modular classrooms currently placed at Mark’s Meadow School. Moving of the modulators is estimated to cost \$140,000. We project that we will be able to contain all our classrooms within Crocker Farm, Fort River and Wildwood Schools without use of the modulators. If it is decided that the modulators must be moved, the net Year 1 savings will be reduced to approximately \$392,000. Consideration may also be given to selling the modulators. Further, if regionalization occurs and if grade six moves to the middle school in a few years, the three remaining schools will have adequate classroom space to contain the K-5 enrollment.

The State of Our Schools – No Change to Current Structure

The choice is not between four schools as we know them and an unknown three-school model. The choice is between four schools with greatly diminished program quality and three schools that preserve \$532,000 in educational program offerings through greater efficiencies (\$673,000 after the first year.)

For FY10, the Town of Amherst faces severe reductions in State Aid. Distributing a proportion of State Aid cuts as proposed in the Governor's budget would require the schools to cut \$1.7M. Distributing a proportion of even deeper State Aid cuts as proposed by the House Ways and Means Committee would require the schools to cut \$2.1M. Town officials and the Budget Coordinating Group (BCG) are working to identify solutions to the budget gap. Meanwhile, the district is proposing cuts of \$1.1M, which includes Central Office and school-based cuts in each of the four schools. These cuts include significant administrative reductions, a decrease of 2 classrooms, cuts to intervention, aesthetics (art, music, physical education), instrumental music, clerical, paraprofessional and custodial staff. These cuts are drastic for our district - still, they do not meet the level of cuts indicated as necessary by the Town of Amherst.

The Amherst Finance Committee recognizes the value to Amherst of the schools' reducing operating costs by such a reorganization; however, it also recognizes the difficulty of making a change of this magnitude – closing a school - by Fall 2009. The Finance Committee has therefore indicated that it may be willing to recommend to Town Meeting to “fill in” the gap between proposed FY10 elementary cuts and the amount considered affordable by the Town by the use of Reserve Funds, if the School Committee has provided a substantial, sustainable organizational change for FY11. This would enable the district to avoid the additional cuts that would otherwise be necessary for FY10, while providing an appropriate amount of implementation time to make sure the reorganization is done as thoughtfully as possible.

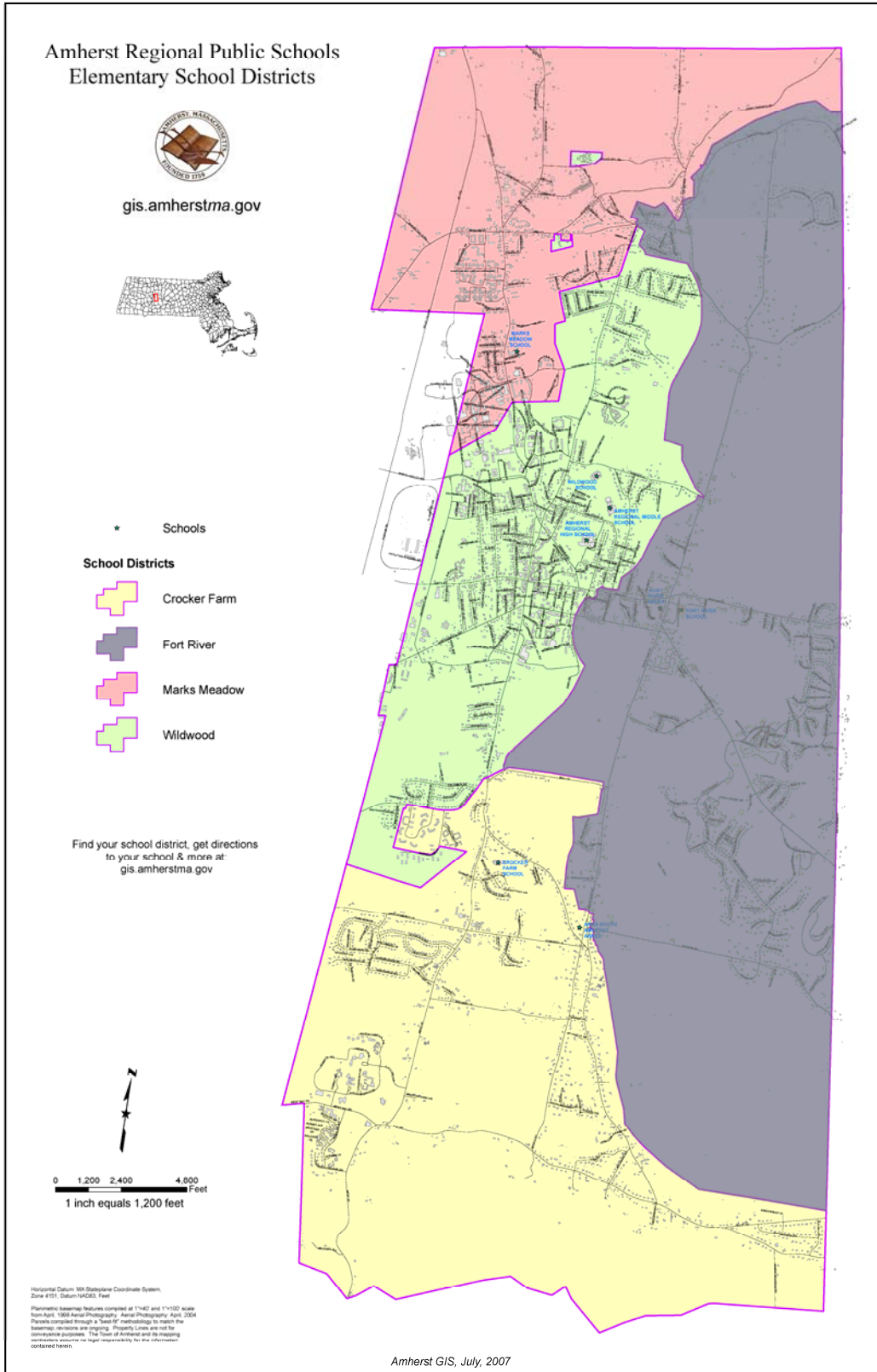
Appendix

In early March the possibility of closing Mark's Meadow and placing those students into the other schools was developed. This scenario looked at the current K-6 students as a starting point to aid in the drawing of school attendance boundaries. In this process the primary constraints applied to the scenario were to balance the socioeconomic spectrum in the schools as well as to relocate students within the classroom capacities of the remaining three schools. Once the initial boundaries were configured, the K-4 students were shifted up two grades (to approximate the FY11 enrollments) and estimates of the number of Kindergarten and first grade classrooms were made to project the overall classroom demand for the 2010-2011 school year if Mark's Meadow were to be closed (using projections for the number of Kindergarten and first grade children expected, 190 and 184 respectively, estimates for the enrollments in the buildings for 2010-2011 have been made).

In early April this school boundary reconfiguration was revisited. In this iteration and building on the expertise gathered in the previous rendition, a new reconfiguration was made for the 2010-2011 school year. As in the first rendition, the current K-6 students were used to redraw the lines and the current K-4 students were rolled forward two years to estimate enrollment in the second through sixth grades. Projections for the next two Kindergarten classes were used to approximate the 2010-2011 Kindergarten and first grade students (184 and 190). The same primary constraints of equity and capacity were applied to this reconfiguration. (The capacity constraint was changed slightly; please see the assumptions sections for details.)

The following pages will list the assumptions and definitions used, the grids of the numbers calculated, and maps of the current boundaries as well as the new scenarios. ***Please note that the work presented is PRELIMINARY.*** As more information is gathered (e.g., data on the incoming Kindergarten class gathered during pre-registration in May) these boundaries and the subsequent calculations will be revisited. **No decisions have been made regarding any boundary reconfiguration;** however, the exercise of making these preliminary calculations is instructive in exploring the choices we have before us.

Current School Boundaries



Rendition 1 – March 2009

Assumptions and Definitions

- The foremost criterion was to try to achieve balance among the elementary schools with respect to the percentage of students on Free/ Reduced Lunch.
- School capacities were based on the available rooms in each of the buildings.
- When shifting school boundary lines, apartment complexes and neighborhoods of single family homes were kept together.
 - Thus, single family home neighborhoods are not split based on streets within the neighborhood and apartment complexes have not been split by building within the complex. However, apartment complexes adjacent to one another (and perhaps considered as being in the same neighborhood) have been treated independent of each other for school boundary reassignment. This is consistent with the status quo.
- All demographic breakdowns and counts of students were based on March 3, 2009 data in PowerSchool (our student information system).
- Possible transportation constraints (such as physical limitations of turn around points) were not considered in any significant way.

The following apartment complexes and neighborhoods of single family homes were specifically considered in the process* (Please see the maps for the specific changes to the boundaries):

Amherst Woods and Pine Grove
Morgan Circle/Hitching Post Road
Grantwood Drive/Blackberry Lane
Rolling Ridge Road
Echo Hill
Harlow Drive/Van Meter
Sheerman Lane/Cherry Lane/Emily Lane
Rolling Green
Logtown Road
Gatehouse Road Apartments (30 Gatehouse Road)
Gatehouse Road Condominium Complexes (e.g., Winston Court, Emerson Court, etc.)
Village Park Apartments
Orchard Valley
North Village Apartments
Single Family Homes in the East Hadley Road area (mostly on the north side of the East Hadley Road and to the west of the apartment complexes)
Southpoint Apartments
The Brook
The Boulders
Hollister Apartments**
Mill Valley Apartments

*Apartment complexes were considered due to their size and location.

**Hollister is not a very large complex but its proximity to the others in the East Hadley Road area prompted its inclusion. Due to its size it was always paired with the Brook or Mill Valley with whom it shares the same street (Riverglade Drive).

Key to Enrollment Charts

SoC = Students of Color

IEP = Individualized Education Plan

504 = A different type of individualized education plan

LEP = Limited English Proficiency

No. of Students Affected = a count of those students whose current school is different from that based on the new boundaries. This count assumes that all students currently in schools via Open Enrollment are moved into the school associated with where they live.

K-6 in 3 Bldgs **3/3/2009**

2010-2011 (shift K-4 up two grades)

Crocker Farm	K est.		1 est.		2		3		4		5		6		Total Students	Totals
Enrollment	54	3	53	3	65	3	39	2	47	2	55	3	57	3	370	19
a.c.s.	18.0		17.7		21.7		19.5		23.5		18.3		19.0		19.5	
Free/Reduced Lunch	15		15		25		14		17		16		10		112	30.3%
IEPs					9		7		10		12		9		47	12.7%
504s					0		1		0		0		3		4	1.1%
LEP					14		4		8		4		4		34	9.2%
SoC					27		19		22		24		18		110	29.7%
No. of Students affected	0		0		25		16		22		27		32		122	33.0%

Fort River	K est.		1 est.		2		3		4		5		6		Total Students	Totals
Enrollment	69	3	67	3	56	3	68	3	62	3	71	3	78	4	471	22
a.c.s.	23.0		22.3		18.7		22.7		20.7		23.7		19.5		21.4	
Free/Reduced Lunch	25		24		23		25		24		25		33		179	38.0%
IEPs					5		7		18		17		20		67	14.2%
504s					0		0		0		3		2		5	1.1%
LEP					8		16		7		8		14		53	11.3%
SoC					33		35		33		40		44		185	39.3%
No. of Students affected	0		0		30		31		30		34		42		167	35.5%

Wildwood	K est.		1 est.		2		3		4		5		6		Total Students	Totals
Enrollment	67	3	64	3	63	3	79	4	70	3	52	3	69	3	464	22
a.c.s.	22.3		21.3		21.0		19.8		23.3		17.3		23.0		21.1	
Free/Reduced Lunch	22		21		24		31		19		11		21		149	32.1%
IEPs					7		11		8		9		14		49	10.6%
504s					0		0		0		0		1		1	0.2%
LEP					15		14		10		7		13		59	12.7%
SoC					30		35		27		22		33		147	31.7%
No. of Students affected	0		0		20		28		20		12		22		102	22.0%

Students	1305	
Rooms	63	
a.c.s.	20.7	
Free/Reduced Lunch	440	33.7%

	Min		Max	
K	18	CF	23	FR,WW
1	17	CF	23	FR
2	18	FR	22	CF
3	19	CF,WW	23	FR
4	20	FR	24	CF,WW
5	17	WW	24	FR
6	19	CF,FR	23	WW

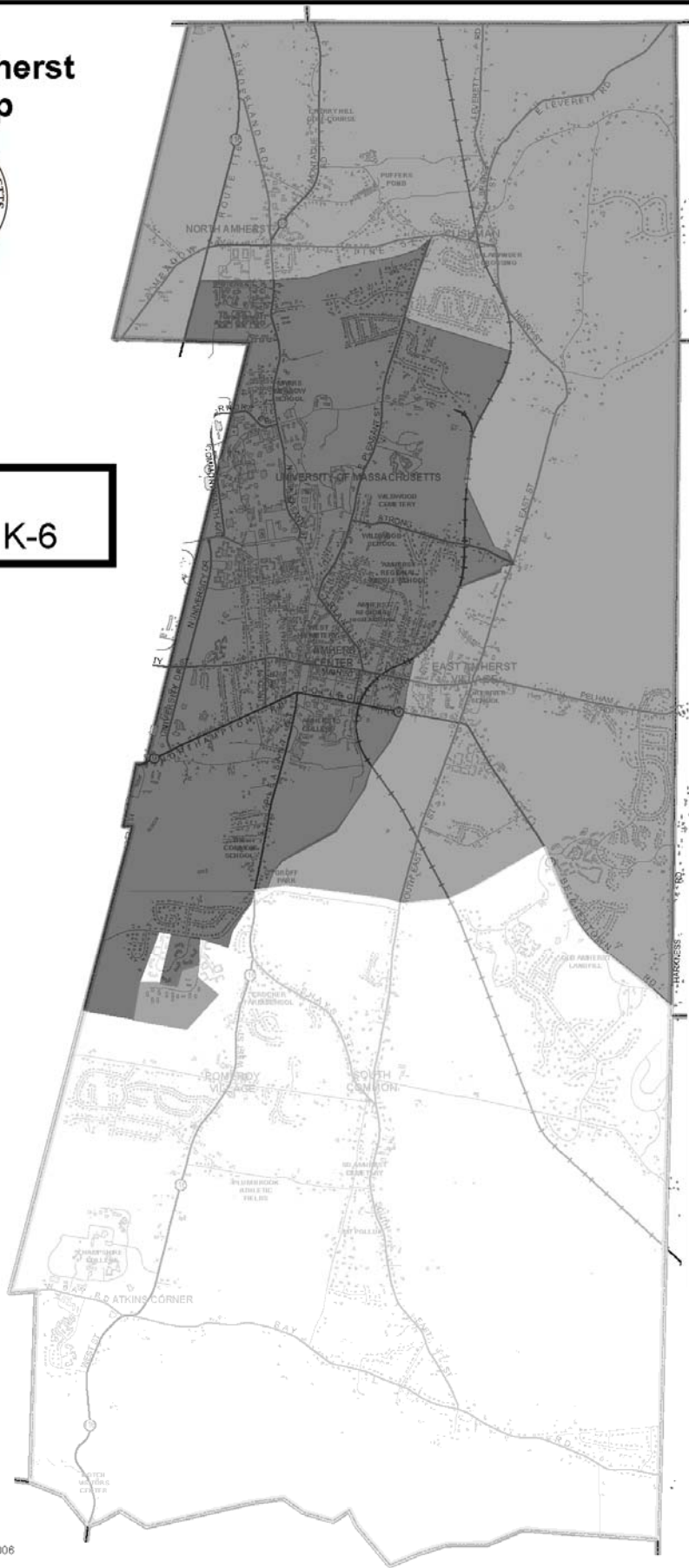
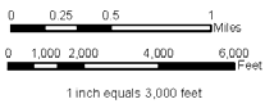
3/3/2009

Town of Amherst Basemap



- Close MM
- Other Schools K-6

- Wildwood
- Crocker Farm
- Fort River



Rendition 2 – April 2009

Assumptions and Definitions

The assumptions and definitions were the same for the second rendition as they were for the first with the following exception: The demographic breakdowns and counts of students were based on April 3, 2009 data.

K-6 in 3 Bldgs 4/3/2009

10-11 (shift K-4 up two grades)

Crocker Farm	K est.		1 est.		2		3		4		5		6		Total Students	Totals
Enrollment	45	3	44	2	59	3	36	2	49	2	48	2	48	2	329	16
a.c.s.	15.0		22.0		19.7		18.0		24.5		24.0		24.0		20.6	
Free/Reduced Lunch	15		15		24		14		19		17		11		115	35.0%
IEPs					10		4		11		8		9		42	
504s					0		1		0		0		3		4	
LEP					13		4		7		5		4		33	
SoC					26		15		22		25		15		103	
No. of Students affected	0		0		20		12		24		20		21		97	

Fort River	K est.		1 est.		2		3		4		5		6		Total Students	Totals
Enrollment	71	4	68	3	58	3	59	3	57	3	74	4	78	3	465	23
a.c.s.	17.8		22.7		19.3		19.7		19.0		18.5		26.0		20.2	
Free/Reduced Lunch	23		22		22		17		21		23		32		160	34.4%
IEPs					6		8		18		18		16		66	
504s					0		0		0		3		1		4	
LEP					9		14		9		7		12		51	
SoC					29		32		29		38		41		169	
No. of Students affected	0		0		14		16		11		19		22		82	

Wildwood	K est.		1 est.		2		3		4		5		6		Total Students	Totals
Enrollment	74	4	72	4	70	4	90	4	73	3	58	3	78	3	515	25
a.c.s.	18.5		18.0		17.5		22.5		24.3		19.3		26.0		20.6	
Free/Reduced Lunch	25		25		29		42		21		14		24		180	35.0%
IEPs					8		13		9		12		17		59	
504s					0		0		1		1		2		4	
LEP					17		14		11		7		15		64	
SoC					37		41		33		24		41		176	
No. of Students affected	0		0		28		41		32		17		35		153	



Students	1309	
Rooms	64	
a.c.s.	20.5	
Free/Reduced Lunch	455	34.8%

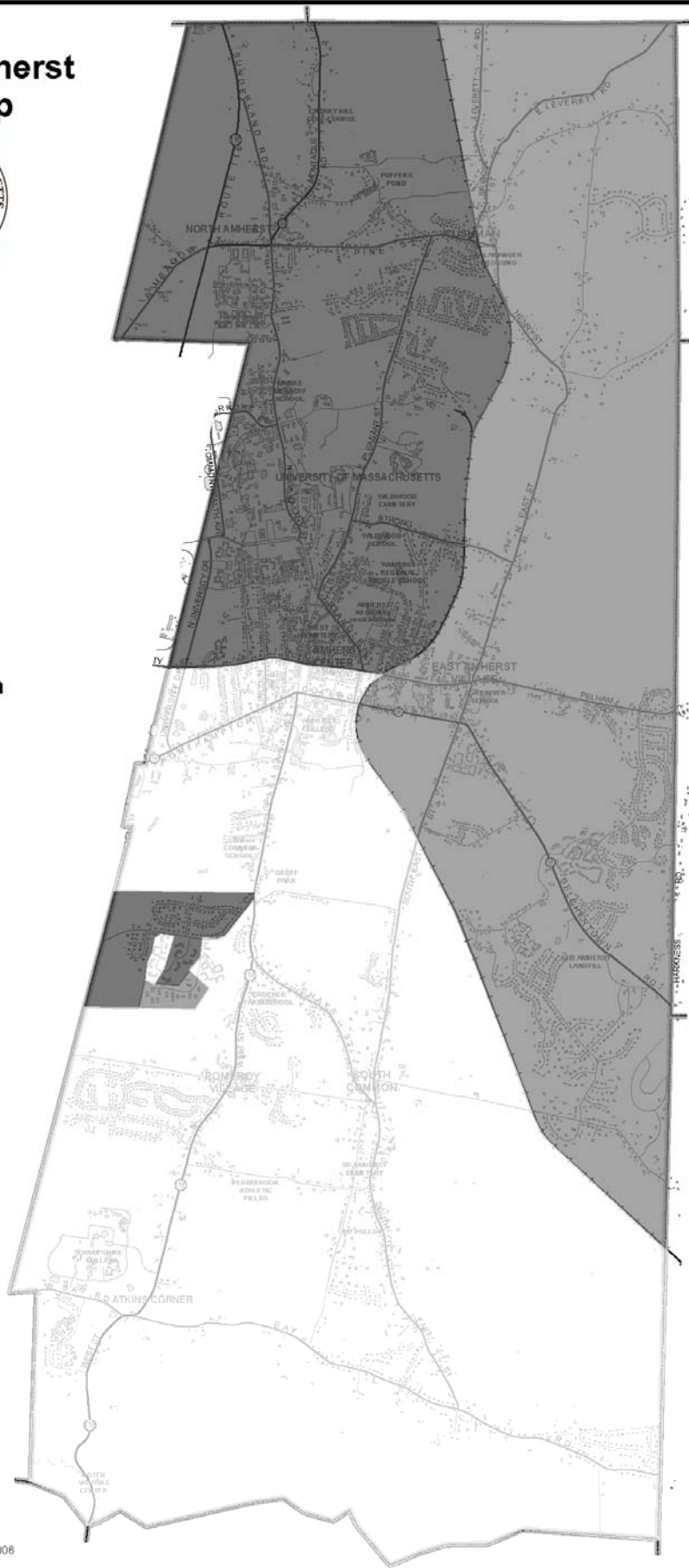
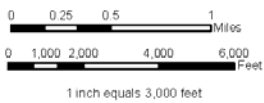
	Min		Max	
K	15	CF	19	WW
1	18	WW	23	FR
2	17	WW	20	CF,FR
3	18	CF	23	WW
4	19	FR	25	CF,WW
5	18	FR	24	CF
6	24	CF	26	FR,WW

4/3/2009

Town of Amherst Basemap



-  Wildwood
-  Crocker Farm
-  Fort River



Feedback

We are interested in getting feedback about this decision from parents, teachers/staff, and community members. All responses are completely anonymous. Please write your questions, concerns, comments, etc. below. You may also submit feedback via the Budget Suggestion Box on the school website. A Question & Answer document will be developed from your feedback. Thank you for participating in this community engagement process.