

# Why should Gloucester's schools be consolidated?

## Jonathan Pope

Why are we trying to consolidate schools now when 12 years ago the Fuller School was closed, and the School Committee was making the case for small schools? The answer is that context matters.

Each year, from 2001 to 2007, the schools had been funded at a less than level-service budget. During each of those years, the school department had to cut programs and services and add fees on extracurricular activities and transportation. It was at this time that the Gloucester Education Foundation was founded for the purpose of helping to fund many of the activities that were cut. Also, during that time, the Gloucester Fisherman Athletic Association was founded in order to help defray the cost of athletic participation for students and families.

There were, at that time, other budgetary concerns. During the years 2001-2007, the cost of utilities and maintenance were part of the school budget. The cost of providing heat and electricity for the large and inefficient Fuller School was increasing every year. Both maintenance and the delivery of education suffered as a result. At the same time, there was a steady decline in school population from a total of 1,865 elementary students in 2001 to 1,492 students in 2007.

Solving the budget issue required addressing energy expenses and the declining student population. In 2007, the number of classes at the elementary level was 14

classes per elementary grade (across all of the schools). We proposed reducing to 10 classes per grade and reducing utility and maintenance expenses by reducing/limiting building use. Fuller School was 176,638 square feet inside and housed four classes per grade, kindergarten through grade 5, as well as all of the elementary substantially separate special education programs, the preschool and administration offices. Even with those programs and offices, Fuller was substantially underutilized. By contrast, East Gloucester, West Parish, Plum Cove, Veterans' Memorial and Beeman Elementary schools, combined, were 144,351 square feet and housed 10 classes per grade, kindergarten through grade 5.

The choice facing the School Committee (and the community) at that time was to either close Fuller or close two of the other elementary schools. Neither of these options were well received by the community. The School Committee's responsibility, however, was and continues to be to provide the best education possible to the children of Gloucester within the city's financial capacity. After much debate and public input, Fuller was closed, and the number of classes per grade was reduced to 12, kindergarten through grade 5, district-wide. It should be noted that the School Committee took this action just in time for the financial crash of 2007. The argument centered on either keeping the small schools open or shutting two of them and creating a school for 750-800 students. The small schools concept won. It was

the right decision at the time.

Today, the School Committee's responsibility is still to provide the best education for the children of Gloucester within the city's financial capacity. West Parish Elementary School is the model school building that we want for all Gloucester elementary students. None of the other existing elementary school buildings meet the educational or supporting space standards that are required to deliver a 21st-century education. The decision to achieve this goal by building a combined Veterans'/East Gloucester elementary school and then a combined Beeman and Plum Cove school was unanimously agreed upon by the School Committee in September of 2016 after a year of debate and seven public hearings. Consolidation of the East Gloucester Elementary and Veterans Memorial schools will provide a more comprehensive education for more students as quickly as possible. And, it is the most financially responsible solution. It takes four to five years from applying to the Massachusetts School Building Authority to students walking into a new building. If the city could afford it, it would take a minimum of 20 years to replace the four elementary schools; in contrast, building two schools will take 10 years. Tearing down East Gloucester Elementary School and building a new school on the same site would cost \$51 million. To build a new consolidated school would cost \$65 to \$69 million. To build four new schools would cost approximately \$204 million in today's dollars. In contrast, the estimate for building two new

schools would cost \$138 million. Over the life expectancy (50 years) of the new schools, maintenance and utilities costs would be substantially less for two larger schools than for four smaller schools. The delivery of education by specialists — music, art, physical education, special education, language and math coaching, interventions and social and emotional counseling — would be far more efficient in larger schools. Larger schools with four sections per grade also provide more capacity to absorb fluctuations in enrollment, leading to more stable catchment areas, and thus a more stable school community.

Is a 440-student school too big? When Fuller school closed, it had well over 500 students. Rockport Elementary School currently has 393 students. The five top-performing elementary schools in Massachusetts (<https://www.schooldigger.com/go/MA/schoolrank.aspx>) range in size from 360 to 422 students. The five-top rated (ranking factors include state test scores, student-teacher ratio, student diversity, teacher quality, grade school ratings, and the overall quality of the school district <https://www.niche.com/k12/search/best-public-elementary-schools/s/massachusetts/elementary-schools-in-massachusetts>) range in size 347 to 567 students. What the School Committee and administration are seeking to do is quite in line with the current trend in school construction and is in the best interest of our students.

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