

# Eastford Elementary School Community Conversation Summary Report

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## **Introduction**

On October 30, 2018, several dozen residents of Eastford, along with members Eastford Elementary School's (EES) staff, gathered at EES to discuss two topics: (1) The future of EES and the potential need to regionalize with another school district due to likely increasing financial demands of the school and students' needs and (2) entertaining other high schools as sending options, in addition to the current primary designated high school option, Woodstock Academy. Residents were initially split into six small groups in which Topics #1 and #2 were discussed with the assistance of impartial moderators. Each group aimed to reflect a range of ages amongst residents, which included group members who had children of school age, group members whose children had moved on past the high school age, and young adults without children. The evening concluded in the gymnasium where a representative from each of the small groups presented the positives and negatives of Topics #1 and #2, in addition to other concerns moving forward.

## **Background Information**

The following information was provided to each resident in attendance:

- Eastford Community Conversation – Index of Supporting Information
- Participant Guide
- Area High School Enrollments, Tuition, and Bus Service Costs
- Eastford Elementary School and High School Enrollments
- Eastford Elementary School's Enrollment Projection to 2024
- Eastford School Budget and Educational Cost Sharing Summary
- Connecticut Department of Education Bureau of Grants Management Cost Per District
- Connecticut Department of Education Finance and Internal Operations Expenditures by Revenue Source
- Eastford Property Taxes and Mill Rate Information
- Eastford CERC Town Profile 2018
- Eastford Demographic Information
- Next Generations Reports Issued by the State of Connecticut
- Eastford Board Policy Series 5000 – Secondary School Attendance and High School Choices

Since 2010, the Eastford education budget which includes elementary and high school expenses has increased by just 6%. In this time period, educational cost sharing of state money supporting Eastford's education has decreased. For example, for the 2011-12 school year 30.80% of Eastford's education budget was covered by state funds. Conversely, 26.29% of Eastford's education budget during the 2018-19 school year will be addressed by state funds.

In 2004, Eastford Elementary School's enrollment totaled 181 students (without pre-school students). Enrollment in 2018 totals 164 students (including pre-school students). Per enrollment projections, calculated in 2015, 124 students will be enrolled in 2024. These numbers do not include high school enrollment. In 2004, eighty-six (86) Eastford students were enrolled in high school. In 2018, fifty-seven (57) Eastford students are enrolled in high school.

In Eastford the net expenditure per pupil during the 2016-17 school year was \$20,747. This is an increase of nearly \$7,000 per student since the 2008-09 school year. \$20,747 per pupil includes expenditures for high school students. Per the Connecticut State Department of Education, of the 219 Connecticut districts, only twenty (20) districts spend more per pupil.

During the 2008-09 school year, tuition and bus service for Eastford students to Woodstock Academy totaled \$10,277 each. During the same time period, ninety-six (96) Eastford students were enrolled at Woodstock Academy. During the 2018-19 school year, tuition and bus service for Eastford students to Woodstock Academy totals \$13,892 each. This is a 35% increase in tuition per student since the 2008-09 school year. Furthermore, during the 2018-19 school year, forty-six (46) Eastford students will be enrolled at Woodstock Academy. This is a 52% decrease in enrollment since the 2008-09 school year.

As of the 2018-19 school year, the tuition of local high schools as possible sending options was as follows: Parish Hill High School \$7,500, Putnam High School \$11,741, Stafford High School \$17,303, Woodstock Academy \$13,892, E.O. Smith High School \$13,014, and Killingly High School \$15,145.

## **Topic #1**

*Can Eastford continue to afford the pre-K through eighth grade school?*

- Option A: The economies of scale for running the elementary school are of concern. Eastford should explore partnering with another district in the future.
- Option B: Maintain the elementary school for Eastford students. Expand options for managing costs.

## **Topic #2**

*Community members wonder whether Woodstock Academy should remain the primary high school choice for Eastford students.*

- Option A: Maintain Woodstock Academy as the primary designated school.
- Option B: Expand or replace the designated school(s) to which Eastford pays tuition and transports students.

## **Group Summary**

### Areas of Disagreement / Questions / Concerns

1. Although some groups reported no disagreements and stated, “If not broke don’t fix it,” other groups acknowledged the realistic nature of the financial situation the town faces. “What is realistic to keeping EES open?” and “What is an acceptable mill increase?” one group identified. An additional group wondered, if regionalization was sought, “What would regionalization look like?”
2. If financial constraints lead to cuts, what would those cuts be? Sports, staff, programs?
3. Will the Nahaco Acres building site, and the hopeful addition of students in EES, alleviate any of the financial constraints in the future?
4. If students were outsourced to a local district, what would become of the EES building? What would the building be used for in the future-a new town hall?
5. How is the final decision made? Who makes the final decision? Is there a timeframe to make a final decision?

### Common Ground

1. An area of common ground amongst all groups was that Eastford Elementary School should remain open and be properly maintained. Additionally, the groups did not waver from their support of the EES staff and administration. Furthermore, some residents / groups support a reasonable tax increase in order to keep the school open (point of reference: with a current budget totaling \$3,818,151, a 1% increase is \$38,181 which is approximately 1/4 of a mill increase).
2. Also, groups felt that Woodstock Academy met most students’ educational needs, but that sending options should be available to those that want it.
3. Groups felt that EES assists in bringing the community together. Without EES town morale declines. Also, without EES, and a focal point in bringing the town together, young families will likely not settle in Eastford.

## Next Steps

1. Each group shared similar hopes for the future including attending Board of Education and budget meetings, establish better communication, establishing a task force in order to acquire and disseminate information to residents, and to establish numbers (what does enrollment hold in the future).

## **Participant Questionnaire Results**

1. Residents universally felt that not enough information had been provided and additional information was needed to further the decision-making process. A future community conversation was recommended / requested in many questionnaires. Necessary information to be collected and presented in a future meeting:

- More budgetary data and research
- Input from representatives from other towns
- Input from representatives from high schools

2. Residents strongly recommended that attendance at future Board of Education and budget meetings would be integral in seeking and obtaining answers.

3. Residents requested additional methods of communication in the future in order to obtain information regarding the topics discussed: emails, the Eastford Communicator, EES website, etcetera.

4. Many residents felt that the moderators' impartial approach helped guide the evening and the discussions within each small group.

5. Thirty-nine (39) questionnaires were completed. Of the 39 questionnaires, Twenty (20) were completed by residents with school age children, Eighteen (18) were completed by residents who did not have school age children, and one (1) resident failed to provide necessary information.