

# Watchung Hills Regionalization Feasibility Study is in session

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**WATCHUNG** – The Regionalization Feasibility Study encompassing Watchung Hills Regional High School (WHRHS) and its sending districts is underway.

The Regionalization Feasibility Study, also called a shared services study, analyzes educational programs for students from preschool to high school, including curriculum coordination, special education programming, and transportation costs, according to the WHRHS website.

The study will also provide a demographic analysis of future enrollment for the five districts, forecast state aid based on those enrollment projections, and evaluate future budget challenges, the WHRHS website states.

Based on this analysis, the study will provide recommendations for educational enhancements and potential cost savings through various options, ranging from expansion of shared services in specific areas to full PreK-12 regionalization.

WHRHS Board of Education member Robert Morrison said at the Tuesday, Feb. 4 meeting that the Watchung Hills Shared Services Regionalization Feasibility Study Advisory Group received an update from the project's research team from the Rowan School Regionalization Institute.

## ***Grant Awarded***

“The researchers shared the progress made on data collection and the next steps in scheduling interviews for superintendents, business administrators, curriculum directors, special services, transportation, and faculty members,” Morrison said. “They also highlighted the ongoing work in evaluating facilities, transportation, and demographic projections.”

[The Watchung Hills Regional High School and Watchung School district were awarded a grant on March 27, 2024 from the state Department of Community Affairs for its Regionalization Feasibility Study.](#)

Morrison said in a phone interview on Tuesday, Feb. 4, that this started historically, going back at least 30 or 40 years. There have been discussions about, “Why do we have so many districts in such a small geographic area?” He added, “Is this the best structure in order to provide students with the best quality education?””

Discussions about an educational feasibility study began in early 2021, Morrison said.

Morrison said that historically, even exploring the idea of shared services or regionalization in and of itself is an expensive proposition.

State legislation passed on Jan. 18, 2022, “Modifies certain procedures pertaining to school district regionalization; establishes [a] grant program for cost reimbursement of conducting regionalization feasibility studies; and provides financial incentives for regionalization.”

“When that legislation was approved, they also came forward with a pot of money,” Morrison said, “And the money was used to basically say, hey, if you will meet these certain criteria within our funding application, then the state will give you a grant to pay for the feasibility study.”

Morrison said the district began the application process in 2021. “We started doing presentations to the sending districts and to our municipal leadership,” Morrison said.

Morrison said there was a lot of initial concern, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation of what the district was trying to accomplish. “People were fearful that if they agreed to participate, that they were obligated to consolidate,” Morrison said. “And that really wasn’t the case at all.”

Morrison said that what the state is trying to do is trying to encourage more collaboration, more shared services, and in appropriate instances, the consideration of consolidation or regionalization of those services.

### ***‘Looking At Everything’***

“We are looking at everything from the status quo to some sort of shared services, to some sort of multiple shared services operation, and all the way up to a full regionalization, which would be a consolidation of all the districts into a single, vertically aligned K-12 district,” Morrison said.

Morrison said that the districts themselves and the boards cannot agree to a regionalization.

“The only way a regionalization can occur is through a vote by the citizens of the communities that are involved in the potential regionalization,” Morrison said.

“There’s partial regionalization and there’s full regionalization,” Morrison said, adding, “Full regionalization would be all four sending districts and Watchung Hills basically combined to create a new K-12 regional school district.”

When discussing partial regionalization, Morrison said, “A partial regionalization could be any combination of the five districts,” Morrison said. “It could be all of the districts.”

When asked about misconceptions about the regionalization feasibility study, Morrison said, “I think the big myth was that by participating in the process, that would automatically mean there’s going to be regionalization, that the state is going to come in and force regionalization to the community. And that’s just not the case.”

Morrison said, “I do think there’s a little bit of that concern that, ‘Oh, with regionalization, does my child in Watchung, are they going to be sent to a school that’s over in Warren and Long Hill?’ And that’s really not the case.”

WHRHS Superintendent Elizabeth Jewett responded to the question, “What are some pros and cons of partial or full school regionalization?” in a written statement on Wednesday, Feb. 5. She wrote, “With regard to your first question, that is what we are hoping the feasibility study will bring to light.”

[The districts included in the study are Watchung Hills Regional, Watchung, Warren, Long Hill, and Green Brook, along with school administrators and municipal officials.](#)

Morrison said in a written statement on Friday, Feb. 7, that the application was originally submitted in 2022 and the district had to reapply in 2023. Morrison added, “Watchung joined us as a partner on the project, but it involves all sending districts.”

[Warren Township Schools Superintendent Matthew Mingle said in a written statement on Monday, Feb. 3, that WHRHS and Watchung boards of education are the district partners who applied for and received state grant funding to explore shared services or school district consolidation.](#)

“Warren Township, while not a formal member of the application team for this work, complies with data requests from the consultants leading this work and sends a Board representative to the Shared Services/Regionalization Advisory Group,” Mingle said in his written statement.

A town hall regarding the feasibility study, Morrison said at the Tuesday, Feb. 4 Board of Education meeting, is tentatively scheduled for Thursday, April 10.

Morrison said in a written statement on Friday, Feb. 7, that the feasibility study began in June 2024 and will be completed with a final report sometime this year.

“We anticipate seeing the drafts of the report sometime in May,” Morrison said. “We will then have to review and make adjustments before the final report is released.”

He added that the release of that report would either be before the end of school [highly unlikely] or the beginning of the new school year in September.