

10. Local Education



Providing quality public education for children and youth is among the most important functions of government in a democratic society. Waitsfield has long performed this task extremely well, especially with regard to grades K–6 which are educated at the Waitsfield Elementary School in Waitsfield Village.

Middle school (grades 7–8) and secondary (grades 9–12) education is provided at Harwood Union School, located on Route 100 in Duxbury. Waitsfield, together with Duxbury, Fayston, Moretown, Warren and Waterbury comprise the Washington West Supervisory Union, which administers Harwood.

The most critical education-related issue facing the town is school funding and the growing burden on local tax payers. This burden increased dramatically with the passage of Act 60 in 1997. Funding issues are addressed in greater detail below.

ENROLLMENT

Figure 10.1 presents enrollment figures for the Waitsfield Elementary School, and enrollment in Harwood attributable to Waitsfield students, for the past six years. In addition, enrollment projections through the 2006/2007 school year, prepared by the Supervisory Union, are also presented in the figure.

After peaking at 180 students in 1997/98, the elementary school’s enrollment has remained relatively stable—averaging 158.5 students—for the following five years. Recent enrollments are higher than they were ten years ago, although current enrollments are well below projections made by the Supervisory Union in the early 1990s. At that time, the school was expected to reach its capacity of 185 students in 1996/1997—which nearly did occur. Enrollments were projected to continue to climb before stabilizing at the end of the decade, although this did not occur. Recent enrollment projections call for a continued decline, to 133 students, in 2006/2007.

The number of students that Waitsfield sends to Harwood has also remained relatively stable in recent years, averaging 106.2 students since 1998/99. Short term projections call for Waitsfield’s share of Harwood’s enrollment to remain stable, although as smaller student bodies advance through the elementary school it is likely that the number of Harwood students from Waitsfield will begin to decline in the next 6-10 years.

The projections prepared by the Supervisory Union are consistent with demographic trends (see Chapter 2). The percentage of the local population within the 18-34 year-old cohort—prime child bearing years—declined from 36% in 1980 to 26% in 1990, down to

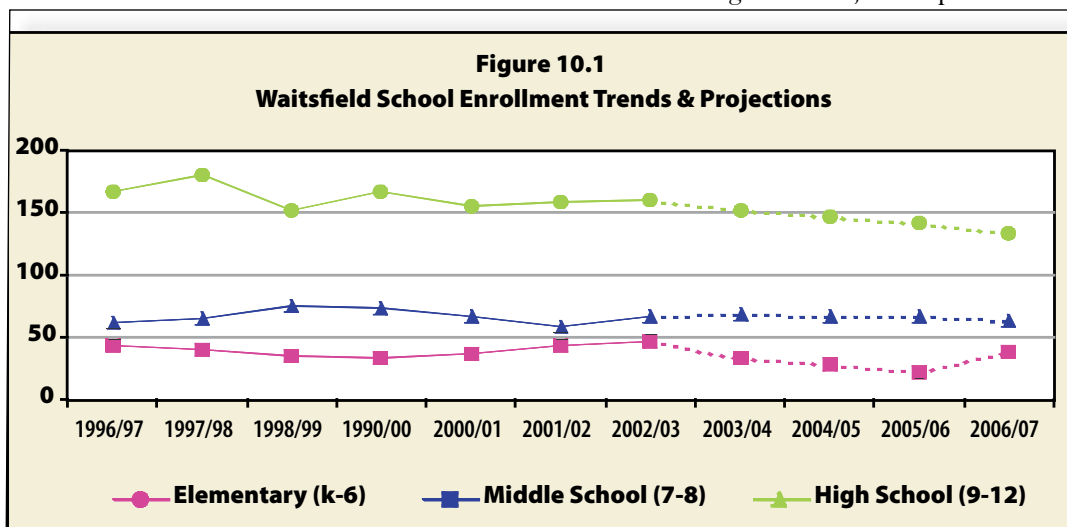
only 20% in 2000. Although the number of women postponing having children until their mid to late 30s is much higher than two decades ago, Waitsfield’s ongoing shift to an older population is not likely to result in substantial enrollment growth in the near future. This could change, however, should the town experience significant in-migration of families with children. Policies to promote greater diversity in the housing stock—and greater demographic diversity—could cause enrolments to increase, although such increases are not likely to be immediate.

WAITSFIELD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

The Waitsfield Elementary School is administered by the Waitsfield School Board, a five member body elected by town voters. In addition to overseeing the operation of the school and the management of school facilities, the Board serves as the town’s liaison with the State Department of Education in ensuring that the Waitsfield school meets state education and facility standards. A summary of school enrollment, staffing and technology trends are presented in Table 10.1

The educational performance of the elementary school student body has been excellent. In 2002, the school received an award from the District Superintendent honoring the performance of Waitsfield students on state assessment programs. According to the respondents to the 2002 Community Survey, the elementary school was among the highest rated local services.

The school underwent a major renovation and expansion in 1991, which brought the facility’s capacity up to 185 students. That expansion, which increased the building from 13,300 square feet to the existing



22,100 square feet, added three new classrooms, a new library, expanded gymnasium and stage area, an art/music room and additional administrative space.

From a facility standpoint, the projected decline in enrollment is good news in that additional space will not be needed to accommodate a growing student body. From a program and budgeting standpoint, however, the projected decline in enrollment is a matter of concern (see discussion on funding below).

Despite the expansion of the building, the school continues to suffer a lack of adequate land for recreation fields and associated outdoor facilities. The School Board acquired a small amount of land when

the town purchased the General Wait House, but that addition did not allow for the creation of new recreation space. A conservation easement was placed on farm land surrounding the school in 2002—much of which is in the 100 year floodplain. Several acres adjacent to existing recreation areas were retained from that easement in the event they might be transferred to the school in the future.

In 2003, the elementary school, in conjunction with the Supervisory Union, established partnerships with three private pre-schools—the Waitsfield Children’s Center and Spring Hill in Waitsfield, and the Children’s Space in Duxbury—as part of an effort to provide educational access to all 3- and 4-

TABLE 10.1 • WAITSFIELD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

					Vermont (most recent)
Participation	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2001-2002
Total Enrollment	149	166	156	159	100,867
Attendance Rate	96.6%	97.4%	96.6%	97.4%	95.1%
Class Size					
Average Class Size	15.2	17.3	16.2	15.2	16.0
Student/Teacher Ratio	11.8	13.8	12.5	12.0	12.0
Eligible Special Education	11.4%	13.3%	11.5%	11.3%	13.0%
Home Study (number)	5	2	2	2	1,540
Technology					
Students per Computer	5.3	4.1	3.6	N/A	5.0
Internet Access	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	97% Yes
Type of Internet Connection	Dial-up	Direct Link	N/A	N/A	N/A
Personnel (FTEs)					
Classroom Teachers	9.36	9.4	9.4	10.20	6,413.16
Other Teachers	4.02	3.40	3.90	3.90	2,510.20
Instructional Aids	2.04	4.30	3.50	3.80	3,580.84
Coordinators/Supervisors	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	184.00
Licensed Administrators	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	420.81
Administrative Support	1.0	1.20	0.40	0.50	502.79
Other	3.23	3.50	4.60	4.40	2,715.38
Average Teacher Salary	N/A	\$39,546	\$38,403	\$40,557	\$39,166

Source: VT Department of Education

year-olds. The Supervisory Union will help develop curricula aligned with state standards, and the additional students will help the Waitsfield school reduce its per-pupil cost, which is significant in light of the declining enrollment and current education funding programs.

HARWOOD UNION HIGH SCHOOL

The Union District, under the guidance of a nine person board of directors, is responsible for the administration of Harwood Union Middle & High School. Representation on the Board is proportional among the member towns, with Waterbury electing four directors and each of the other town’s electing one member each.

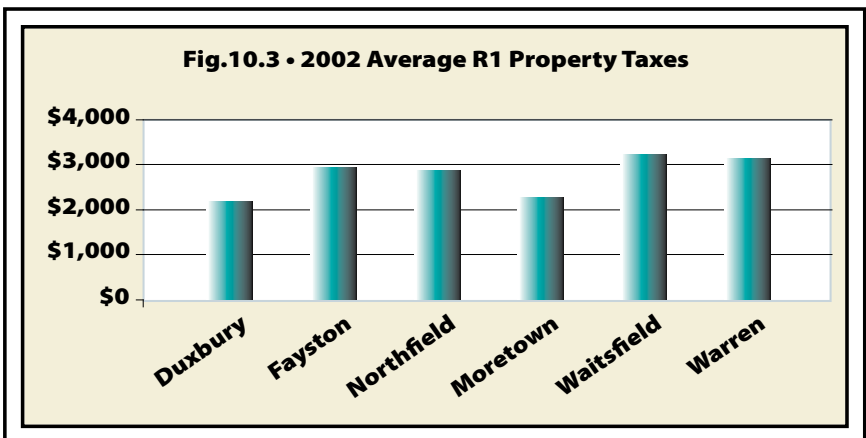
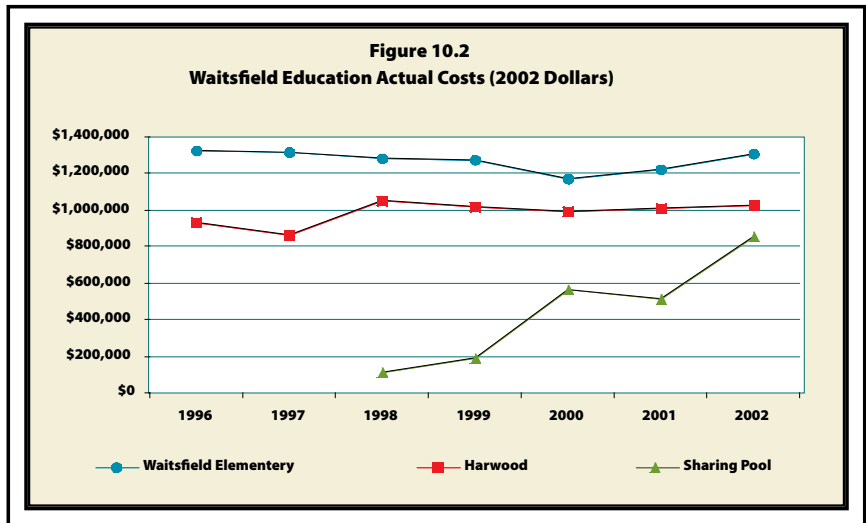
Located on Route 100 in Duxbury, Harwood was opened in 1967 with a capacity of 800 students. The school was upgraded and expanded in 1996/97, and now has a core capacity of between 900 and 1,000 students, depending upon program configuration. With the recent construction of Crossett Brook Middle School to serve 7th and 8th graders from Waterbury and Duxbury, additional capacity became available at Harwood. In 2001/2002 173 middle school (grade 7-8) students and 617 high school (grade 9-12) students attended Harwood, for a total of enrollment of 790. Of the total, 101 students—12.8% of the student body—were from Waitsfield.

Projections call for total enrollment to increase to near capacity next year, based on current numbers in lower grades, and then to fall off. This increase through 2004-05 appears to represent a “bubble” in the student population which could be weathered without a major facility expansion. There is concern, however, that rapid growth (or decline) in one or more member communities could place a burden on the school system as a whole. In light of the rapid population growth experienced in all District towns, this should be closely monitored.

Possible future options to address expanding enrollment that have been identified include the construction of a separate middle school for Mad River Valley towns, or building an addition

onto Crossett Brook to allow Harwood to serve only high school students. Neither of these options is presently receiving serious consideration. No expansion or major improvements—other than routine maintenance—to the school building are presently planned in the next five years.

As in the case of the Waitsfield Elementary School, there is concern over the adequacy of Harwood’s athletic fields. The existing fields were originally designed to serve four teams. Apart from the construction of a track and hockey field in 1982, no additional field space has been created since 1967. Today the school fields 21 teams. The lack of field space at the school has limited program expansion, and requires that a number of teams be bussed off-campus in order to practice and/or play games. A 1999 study was undertaken to evaluate the possibility of expanding current fields—to include the creation of a softball field and another field to be used for soccer and lacrosse. A 2002 bond vote for \$285,000 to support this expansion, and also refurbish the track



and field shed, was defeated by voters.

Harwood's academic program includes college preparatory, business and limited vocational courses. The school has invested in technology, including the creation of a technology reserve fund. Expanded program offerings are available through various agreements with other educational facilities. The high school offers special education services through the Learning Resource Center located within the school complex. An alternative school for students in grades 10-12—the Waterbury-based Harwood Community Learning Center—was also established in 2001 to provide academic and work experience for students who are less successful in a traditional school setting.

The state currently provides vocational education opportunities through a system of sixteen vocational centers serving local high schools around the state. Unfortunately, the nearest such center to Harwood is in Barre. Presently, transportation is provided for Harwood students to attend vocational programs in Barre and, in some cases, Burlington. Harwood does provide some vocational opportunities on site, although these are limited.

Harwood High School has a much lower drop out rate (0.5% in 2002) than the state average (3.9%). Of graduating seniors, 75% planned to continue their education at 2- and 4-year colleges.

COST OF EDUCATION

It would be difficult to overstate the level of local concern related to educational funding. Property taxes was one of the two most common responses to the 2002 Community Survey question “what are the greatest challenges likely to face Waitsfield in the coming 5 years?”.

While concern over taxes is likely as old as taxation itself, the passage of Act 60 in 1997 has resulted in overwhelming—and growing—concern that the current system of funding education is not sustainable. As this plan is being written, it appears that the Vermont legislature will revise Act 60, so a detailed description of the present funding system would likely be outdated before the plan is adopted. The past impact on the community may be seen in Figure 10.2, which shows annual education costs to the Town of Waitsfield since 1996, in addition to the town's contribution to the state “sharing pool” which is used to fund education statewide.

The town's contribution to the state—which is the “net” contribution excluding the amount of statewide property tax money that is used for local education—has increased from approximately \$100,000 in 1998 to \$850,000 in 2002. There are several reasons for this sharp increase, including:

- ◆ **A decline in enrollment at the elementary school which, because many fixed costs are not subject to change as enrollment fluctuates, results in a higher cost per pupil. Because state funding is based on per-pupil cost, as that cost increases above the state per-pupil block grant the required contribution to the sharing pool increases. Although Figure 10.2 shows that total education costs have experienced modest fluctuations in recent years (adjusted for inflation), the cost per-pupil has grown from \$6,872 in 1999 to \$8,027 in 2002. The state block grant was \$5,601 in 2002, up from \$5,010 in 1999.**
- ◆ **Related to declining enrollment has been the state's recent practice of transferring money from the state educational fund to the general fund, rather than returning the funds to communities' in the form of higher per-pupil block grants. In effect, the statewide educational property tax is subsidizing other state services.**
- ◆ **Rapid appreciation of real estate values which has adversely impacted the so-called “Common Level of Appraisal” (CLA). The CLA is the state's mechanism for equalizing property tax assessments of all municipalities through statistical formula based upon property transfers. While few would dispute that real estate prices have risen significantly in town, the sale of several very high end homes at prices twice their appraised value or greater has resulted in unpredictable fluctuations in the town's CLA, which has the effect of increasing the town's effective tax rate.**

Until recently, these problems were primarily the concern of property-wealthy “gold towns.” Increasingly, this issues are creating problems for a greater number and variety of towns. In some respects Act 60 has achieved its purpose. Income sensitivity provisions which cap the amount of household income that property tax payers are required to pay for property taxes, for example, have sheltered lower income families from the growing tax burden. As Figure 10.3 shows, the combination of high property values and the factors outlined above have resulted in Waitsfield having the highest average property tax burden on R-1 homeowners (owners of single family homes on less than 6 acres) in the Valley—among the highest average in Washington County!

As this plan is being completed, the Vermont Legislature has adopted legislation that will significantly change Act 60 (“Act 68”). The law will “split” the grand list by levying a statewide property tax of

\$1.59 per \$1,000 in valuation on commercial properties and vacation homes, increase the per-pupil block grant to school districts, provide additional funding for local education through an increase in the state-wide sales tax, and eliminate the state “sharing pool.” The law is scheduled to be in effect by 2005. While it promises to provide some relief to local tax-payers, the long term effect on taxes and education remains to be seen.

ADULT EDUCATION

There are no formal opportunities for continuing adult education in the Mad River Valley. The nearest source of adult education opportunities are available through the Community College of Vermont (CCV)’s Waterbury campus, and at nearby schools, including the University of Vermont, and several other private colleges in Burlington, Northfield, Middlebury and the Vermont Technical College in Randolph. Opportunities for “distance learning” on-line and through Waterbury’s Vermont Interactive Television (ITV) site are also growing each year.

A variety of adult basic educational programs are available through Central Vermont Adult Basic Education, also located in Waterbury. These include individualized and group educational services to adults in their homes, at the learning center, and in community settings. Basic education programs serve those who wish to improve their reading, writing and math skills for use on the job or in daily life, those who are studying for their high school equivalency degree (GED) or adult diploma, and those who want to learn English as a second language. Computer training is also available.

The Adult Basic Education Center also offers a family literacy program, an out of school youth program, a teen parenting education program, and a getting ready to work program for welfare recipients who are seeking academic and job skills to improve their occupational outlook.

**EDUCATION
GOAL**

The availability of high quality educational facilities and programs to enable all Waitsfield residents, especially children and youth, to become competent, productive and responsible citizens.

**EDUCATION
POLICIES**

- 1) Continue to provide sufficient and appropriate K-12 school facilities to meet current and anticipated enrollments.
- 2) Support programs and efforts to strengthen the central role that the Waitsfield Elementary School plays in the community, including providing access to school facilities for community events and activities in a manner that does not interfere with the school’s primary function of educating the town’s youth.
- 4) Support activities to engage middle and high school students in community activities.
- 5) Acquire additional land adjacent to the Waitsfield Elementary School for recreation purposes, should that land become available for purchase.
- 6) Support local and state efforts to reduce reliance on the local property tax to fund education, and actively promote alternatives to current statewide property appraisal formulas which discriminate against local property owners.
- 7) Support creativity, innovation and imagination when planning for future educational needs of the town’s student population, and encourage efforts to strengthen the important role played by local schools in fostering community and a shared purpose among local residents.
- 8) To the extent practical, improve efficiencies through coordination with neighboring school districts.

**EDUCATION
TASKS**

- 1) Continue to monitor enrollment and population trends, and to make regular enrollment projections to ensure that the school system is prepared for significant changes in enrollment trends. *[School Board, Planning Commission]*
- 2) Consider appointing high school students as ex-officio (non-voting) members of local boards. *[Select-board]*