

Efficiency & Regionalization Grant – Nauset Elementary Schools (Feb 2024)

Purpose - describe the proposed project, including purpose of the grant request, project objectives, and the challenge(s) this project would address:

The Nauset Regional Public School District serves four (4) member towns on the Lower & Outer Cape: Brewster, Orleans, Eastham, and Wellfleet. The District is currently comprised of a fully regionalized middle school (Grades 6-8) and high school (Grades 9-12) as well as four (4) separate elementary school districts – one for each member town. Each elementary district develops its own budget, and each is governed by their own respective Elementary School Committee. The Nauset Regional School Central office staff provide administrative support to the 4 elementary districts and the regional district. Orleans, Eastham, and Wellfleet each have a single elementary school. Brewster has two elementary schools (Grades PK-2 & Grades 3-5). Although the District administers a Pre-K program in Brewster & Eastham, there is generally limited coordination or sharing of services/resources across the elementary schools.

Total current elementary school enrollment in all four towns is approximately 850 students (PK-5). In 2000, it was over 1400. Over this same time frame, student enrollment at the middle school is down from about 800 students to less than 500. Overall enrollment in the district has decreased by more than 50% in the past 20 years. Pre-pandemic trend data indicated that enrollment is expected to continue to decline. Since the pandemic, the cost of housing in the Lower & Outer Cape has increased exponentially (at least 30%), further exacerbating the ability of young families to live in or move to our communities and heightening challenges with retaining and hiring qualified staff. At the same time, in recent years, various budgetary pressures have increased school operating expenses, leading to numerous operating overrides in the member towns to help fund school budgets. Annual operating overrides to support school expenses that exceed available levy capacity are not sustainable long-term.

In addition, the Towns of Orleans and Brewster both need to make decisions about significant capital investments to upgrade their elementary schools in the near future. Based on a 2023 report, the Orleans Elementary School requires at least \$44M in upgrades to their facilities to bring them up to code. A new building is expected to cost up to \$55M. Current enrollment in Orleans (K-5) is approximately 140 students. Per DESE standards, new schools must be designed to accommodate a minimum of 240 students. The Stony Brook Elementary School (PK-2) in Brewster is facing \$13+M in needed improvements to its roof and HVAC system. Funding for a similar study for that facility has been approved and we expect the cost to bring that facility up to code will be comparable to the findings in Orleans. These decisions are complicated by the fact that each of the elementary schools are currently not fully utilizing their facilities.

This pre-feasibility study seeks to gather and analyze data for the elementary schools in all four towns regarding operating expenses, staffing levels, student-to-teacher ratios, enrollment trends, facility utilization, physical building conditions, anticipated capital expenditures, and student transportation systems to identify potential efficiencies across the schools and help inform future decision about opportunities to reduce elementary school capital and operating expenses while maintaining the district's high educational standards. This grant would also help assemble and account for similar data for the middle school, which is facing comparable challenges in terms of managing operating expenses, declining enrollments, and looming capital needs to better understand the extent to which greater efficiencies could be gained across the entire district. This project seeks to identify and explore financially sustainable educational service models and targeted capital investments that meet each community's expectations.

Benefits - identify project benefits including efficiencies, cost savings, enhanced service delivery, and/or improved public access to local government services:

Our elementary school budgets are increasing at unsustainable levels, particularly in the face of consistently declining enrollment across the district. Facility use is currently not optimized. In Brewster, these space utilization considerations were expressly identified in a 2021 Consolidation Feasibility Report (see attached). The four towns would benefit from having similar data for the other three elementary schools in Orleans, Eastham, and Wellfleet, as well as updating and expanding analysis of Brewster school data. Potential benefits of some form of regionalization or consolidation across the elementary schools include:

- Reducing operating expenses while maintaining high educational standards
- Maximizing space utilization and avoiding duplication of major capital investments in aging facilities
- Leveraging economies of scale in delivering educational programs and support services
- Streamlining administration and governance of five relatively small elementary schools

Cost Impact and Sustainability Plan - identify any new costs that will be incurred and how the costs will be paid for or offset, including ongoing operational costs. Describe how this new initiative will be self-sustaining within one year and financially viable for the long-term:

Funding from this grant will cover the costs of consultant services to:

- Provide a comprehensive physical and educational assessment of the five (5) elementary school buildings related to short- and long-range facilities planning, capacity determinations, space requirements that are influenced by our educational programs, and adequacy of the facilities

- Gather and analyze key data and metrics regarding operating expenses, staffing levels, student-to-teacher ratios, enrollment trends, instructional practices, programmatic needs, facility utilization, physical building conditions, technology infrastructure, anticipated capital expenditures, and student transportation systems for all five elementary schools
- Identify potential opportunities to gain or maximize efficiencies in these areas across the elementary schools
- Broadly examine advantages and challenges to some forms of consolidation and/or regionalization across the elementary schools
- Produce a clear and concise report on their findings and deliver a presentation to Town and School leaders in the four-member communities

Measures of Success - what defines success for this project? Describe how the success of the project will be evaluated. Include expected measurable improvements in service delivery or efficiency:

Recognizing the challenges we are facing, the Elementary School Committees and Select Boards in Brewster, Orleans, Eastham, and Wellfleet have all indicated their support for undertaking this study. The Nauset Regional School Committee assented to including the middle school in this project as well. The project would be successful if these respective Boards and Committees utilize its findings to inform future decision making about whether to further explore efficiencies, consolidation, and/or regionalization of the elementary schools, and account for the report in decision making around major upcoming capital improvements, particularly for the elementary schools in Brewster and Orleans. If data in certain areas identified in the report look promising in terms of opportunities for gaining efficiencies and/or some form of regionalization, more intensive study of those scenarios would occur either through subsequent grant funding or through direct local appropriations. If there is clear consensus regarding the benefits of implementing certain findings from the report, those could be undertaken in the near term.

Project Budget - provide a detailed and realistic project budget estimate. Include breakdown of amount requested by activity/task:

We are seeking \$200,000 in grant funding to hire a consultant to assemble and analyze data, develop a report, and present their findings. The Brewster School Consolidation Report from 2021 examined two elementary schools and had a similar but narrower scope of work, and it cost approximately \$45,000.

Project Timeline - provide a timeline for the proposed project. Note projects must be completed within 18 months of the award date.

Once grant funding is awarded:

- Develop and issue a Request for Proposals for consultant services (Months 1-2)
- Review RFP responses and award/execute contract (Month 3)
- Hold kick-off meeting with selected consultant & gather input from Town & School administration (Month 4)
- Provide data to consultant (Months 5-7)
- Develop draft report (Months 8-11)
- Review draft report with Town & School administration (Month 11)
- Finalize & deliver report (Months 12-13)
- Present findings to Select Boards & School Committees (Month 14-15)