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*UNDERSTANDING ENROLLMENT AT
HOOSAC VALLEY REGIONAL SCHOOL
DISTRICT*

WHO STAYS, WHO LEAVES AND WHY?

*MICHAEL J. HENAULT AND KELLY LINKENHOKER
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY
Hoosac Valley Regional School District*

Table of Contents

List of Tables 3

List of Figures 3

Executive Summary 5

Organizational Context 7

Demographics of Adams and Cheshire 7

Adams-Cheshire Regional School District becomes Hoosac Valley Regional 8

School Choice at HVRSD 11

Problem of Practice 12

Review of the Literature 13

Defining School Choice 14

History of School Choice 14

Expanded Choice and Inequality in Rural Districts 16

Demographics of School Choice 18

Parent decision-making and school choice 20

 Models of school choice decision making 22

Summary of Literature Review 24

Conceptual Framework 24

School choice decision-making in a bounded rationality framework 25

Conceptualizations of key school choice factors 26

Research Questions 26

Project Design 27

Participant Recruitment and Sample 28

Data Collection 29

 Focus Groups 29

Data Analysis 31

Findings 32

Perceptions of disorder 32

 Discipline data 34

Perception of low levels of resources 35

 Total Per Pupil Expenditures 37

Percent actual net school spending above/under foundation budget.....	37
Low academic achievement.....	38
Academic Data	40
Graduation Rates and Plans after graduation.....	41
School structures and facilities	42
Analysis of Statewide Grade Structure.....	44
Other emergent themes	44
Communication	44
Leadership Consistency and Turnover	47
Loss of Identity	50
<i>Discussion and Interpretation of Findings</i>	<i>51</i>
What are the push factors leading to school choice from HVRSD?.....	51
What are the characteristics of the students and families choosing to leave or stay?57	57
<i>Recommendations.....</i>	<i>59</i>
Summary of Recommendations	59
Recommendation 1: Establish an ad hoc stakeholder committee to update the HVRSD Code of Conduct	60
Recommendation 2: Provide professional learning focused on responding to behavior concerns	62
Recommendation 3: Engage in shared service agreements with surrounding organizations.....	63
Recommendation 4: Leverage existing PLCs to improve quality of instruction.....	65
Recommendation 5: Continue creating academic and career pathways for students	67
Recommendation 6: Assess school facilities and explore restructuring grade distributions	68
Recommendation 7: Develop a district wide communication plan	69
<i>Limitations</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>72</i>
<i>Appendix I: Letter to Focus Group Participants.....</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>Appendix II: Frequency counts of coded themes</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Appendix III: Representative quotations of each coded theme.....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>References.....</i>	<i>79</i>

List of Tables

<i>Table 1: HVRSD Enrollment by grade (2022-23)</i>	10
<i>Table 2: HVRSD Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (2022-23)</i>	11
<i>Table 3: Enrollment of students represented in focus groups</i>	28
<i>Table 4: Frequency of qualitative Codes used in coding transcripts.</i>	32
<i>Table 5: Percentage of students suspended in-school</i>	35
<i>Table 6: Percentage of students suspended out-of-school</i>	35
<i>Table 7: Percent Exceeding or Meeting English Language Arts MCAS (Grades 3-8)</i>	40
<i>Table 8: Percent Exceeding or Meeting Mathematics MCAS (Grades 3-8)</i>	41
<i>Table 9: Percent Exceeding or Meeting English Language Arts MCAS (Grade 10)</i>	41
<i>Table 10: Percent Exceeding or Meeting Mathematics MCAS (Grade 10)</i>	41
<i>Table 11: Percent Graduated in 4 years</i>	42
<i>Table 12: Dropout Rate: HVRSD v State</i>	42
<i>Table 13: Graduates Attending Colleges and Universities</i>	42
<i>Table 14: Frequency Count for Focus Group 1</i>	76
<i>Table 15: Frequency Count for Focus Group 2</i>	76
<i>Table 16: Frequency Count Totals</i>	76

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Adams, Cheshire, and Combined Population Decline</i>	8
<i>Figure 2: HVRSD Declining Enrollment, 2000-2022</i>	9
<i>Figure 3: Conceptual Framework</i>	25
<i>Figure 4: Total Per Pupil Expenditures, HVRSD v. State</i>	37

Figure 5: % Actual Net Spending Above or Below Foundation Budgets, HVRSD v State..... 38

Figure 6: Superintendent Retention, HVRSD v State 49

Figure 7: Principal Retention, HVRSD v State 49

Figure 8: Teacher Retention, HVRSD v State 50

Figure 9: HVRSD Enrollment Trend: % Students of Color 57

Figure 10: HVRSD Enrollment Trend: % White 58

Executive Summary

This improvement project explores how the Hoosac Valley Regional School District (HVRSD), a Massachusetts regional school district including the towns of Adams and Cheshire, can slow their decreasing enrollment, specifically attributed to school choice. We sought to understand how to increase and sustain enrollment and identify push and pull factors that lead families to consider school choice. Smrekar (2009) refers to both “push” (reasons for exit) and “pull” (reasons for entry) factors as influencing parents’ school choice decisions. Therefore, we used relevant school choice literature to explore these factors within the context of HVRSD.

In collaboration with district leadership and the family engagement coordinator, we conducted an analysis of enrollment trends that helped us create focus groups that explored the factors within HVRSD that have prompted families to choose other districts. We analyzed their responses through our conceptual framework to identify findings likely contributing to school choice. We formulated recommendations for the district that we feel will likely help recruit and retain Adams and Cheshire students. Ultimately, implementing these recommendations will increase the likelihood families will choose HVRSD for their students’ education.

Our most salient findings include five major themes that emerged through our research:

1. A driving factor in considering other school districts is the perception of disorder within HVRSD and the belief that student behavior is affecting the social emotional well-being and academic success of all students.
2. Low levels of fiscal resources have created a perception that other districts have more and higher quality academic and nonacademic programming.
3. Low academic achievement is a push factor that contributes to families choosing other districts.

4. A perception driving school choice is that district facilities are deteriorating, and current limitations necessitate nontraditional age groupings at the elementary and middle schools.
5. Communication with families is overly complex and does not effectively provide information that is important to the community.

Based on the above findings we make the following evidenced-based recommendations:

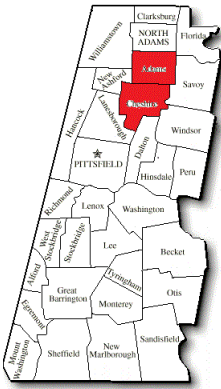
1. Establish an ad hoc stakeholder committee to create an updated code of conduct.
2. Provide professional learning opportunities to help teachers respond to behavior concerns.
3. Continue exploring shared service agreements with surrounding districts, municipalities, and colleges to increase access to the desired programming.
4. Leverage existing Professional Learning Communities to increase rigor and improve instructional practices.
5. Continue the pursuit of “Pathways” approved by the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education to create clear options for specific academic and career outcomes.
6. Partner with the Massachusetts School Building Association to complete an assessment of current school facilities in exploration of restructuring HVRSD schools into more traditional grade distributions.
7. Develop a streamlined, district-wide communication plan that prioritizes ease of access.

There were several limitations to our study including a lack of local school choice data, the reluctance of some school choice families to share their opinions, and the methodological

limitations associated with mixed-methods research. Further, some of the assumptions underlying our conceptual framework, including that parents are the primary school choice decision makers may have had an impact on our findings. However, we feel our findings illuminate several key areas for improvement for HVRSD and that the implementation of our recommendations will help slow downward enrollment trends and help make HVRSD the first choice for more families of students from Adams and Cheshire.

Organizational Context

To understand why families are choosing to leave HVRSD for other options, it is essential first to explore the school district in its historical, geographic, and demographic context. HVRSD is a public school district that serves Adams and Cheshire, Massachusetts. Located within the Appalachian Mountains in northern Berkshire County, the towns are geographically isolated from major economic, political, and population centers. Despite not meeting federal criteria for being defined as a rural school, the geographic reality of the area makes many of the district’s challenges like those of rural communities.



Demographics of Adams and Cheshire

Adams and Cheshire have populations of 8,166 and 3,258 respectively as of the 2020 U.S. Census. Adams has a 56.5% employment rate and a median household income of \$49,691 and 22% of adults hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. Cheshire has a 52.6% employment rate and a median household income of \$69,069 and 33% of adults hold a bachelor’s degree or higher (US Census). Over the past two decades rural population decline and the subsequent declining tax bases have made it increasingly hard to adequately fund public education in rural Massachusetts. During that time, Massachusetts’ most rural counties have declined by an average

of 2.5% while nonrural areas in the state have risen by an average of 12.5% (Blais & Hinds, 2022). This shift has pushed more fiscal resources away from rural areas toward urban areas in the state. Adams and Cheshire are part of that story. As can be seen by Figure 1 there has been a steady decline in both towns for the past 30 years, and in the past two decades the combined population of the two towns has decreased by 6.6% or 330 people.

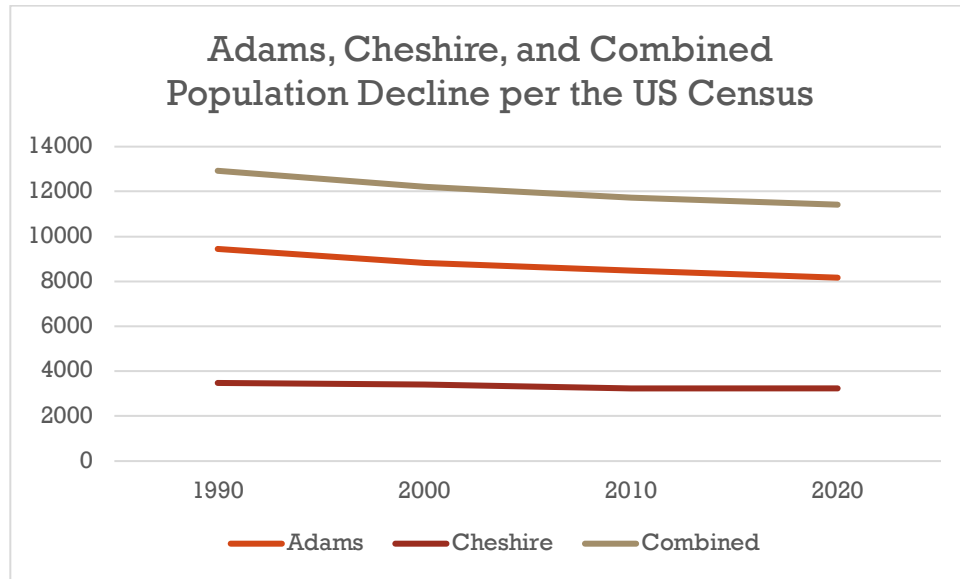


Figure 1: Adams, Cheshire, and Combined Population Decline

Adams-Cheshire Regional School District becomes Hoosac Valley Regional

The two towns have been part of a regional agreement since 1966. Previously called the Adams-Cheshire Regional School District, it was renamed Hoosac Valley Regional School District in 2019 to build a single district identity that did not differentiate between the two towns. The district is governed by an elected school committee representative of both towns and is led by a superintendent of schools who leads an administrative team of 3 principals, 3 deans of students, 2 assistant principals of learning, 87.5 teachers, 91.2% of which are licensed in their field.

At its peak enrollment of 1,994 in 1995 Adams-Cheshire Regional had four schools: an elementary and middle school in Adams and an elementary and high school in Cheshire. Since

then, school enrollment has steadily declined (see Figure 2). In 2012, after a decade of continuously declining enrollment and deteriorating school buildings raised the question whether district facilities should be consolidated.

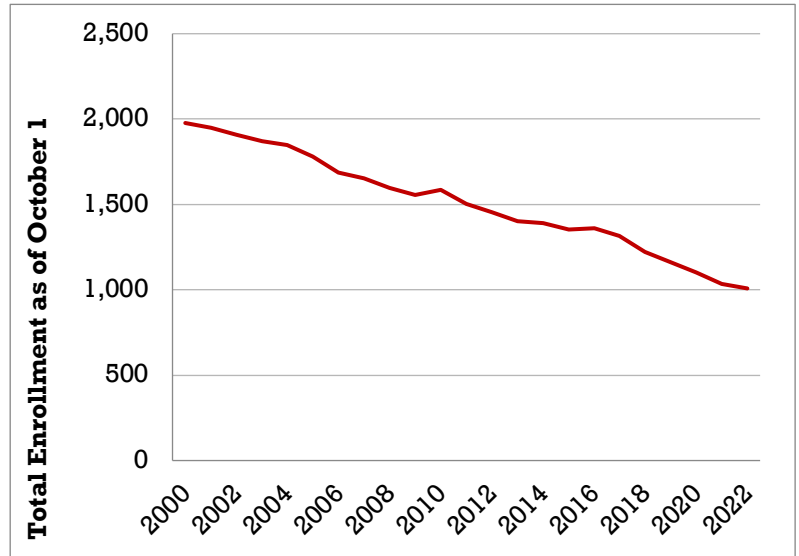


Figure 2: HVRSD Declining Enrollment, 2000-2022

Fiscal resources available from state and local sources proved insufficient to fund the continuation of regular year over year cost increases. The budget trajectory was untenable and academic achievement was declining below state averages. At the behest of Adams and Cheshire officials and the Adams-Cheshire Regional School District, the Collins Center for Public Management consulted on a district study that explored space use alternatives that “considered changes to grade configurations at the district’s elementary, middle, and high schools to improve academic attainment while also reducing costs by between \$376,500 and \$550,600” (Collins Center, 2015). At their suggestion, Cheshire Elementary School was closed in 2017. At the same time, school choice numbers in Adams and Cheshire rose to all-time highs. This project coincided with the departure of long-time superintendent of schools who retired in 2012. He was replaced first by an interim and then by a series of three superintendents who served one- and two-year tenures. The current superintendent was hired in 2019.

While Adams-Cheshire does not meet the federal criteria to be classified as rural (having a population less than 2,500), the district does meet the Massachusetts definition of rural school

district based on the formula that includes population density and median household income. Therefore, it is necessary to consider HVRSD through a rural lens.

According to a recent study on the fiscal health of rural school districts in Massachusetts (Blais & Hinds, 2022), many students from rural communities’ choice out of district to attend schools with more courses, programs, and extra-curricular activities, which may have been cut in their home districts. The loss of students through school choice from districts already struggling financially has a substantial adverse fiscal impact on these districts. It also impacts school cultures adversely by reducing student engagement and reducing the number of parents or care providers who actively support and advocate for these schools. Importantly, HVRSD is one of “25 of 72 rural districts in the state that had between 10% and 28% of their foundation students leave through school choice” (Blais & Hinds, 2022, p. 22).

The towns have 1,469 school-aged children who participate in a mix of public, public vocational, charter, private, and parochial schools. Effectively 33% of eligible students choose a different school district, however based on the state definition, 12.1% participate in school choice. The district currently enrolls 986 students in grades PreK-12 at two school sites: Hoosac Valley Elementary in Adams (HVES) and Hoosac Valley Middle (HVMS) and High School (HVHS) in Cheshire.

	PK	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	SP	Total
HVES	47	70	98	68	91	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	374
HVHS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	82	49	41	51	1	324
HVMS	0	0	0	0	0	67	77	66	78	0	0	0	0	0	0	288
District	47	70	98	68	91	67	77	66	78	100	82	49	41	51	1	986

Table 1: HVRSD Enrollment by grade (2022-23)

Source: Massachusetts DESE, District and School Profile (2022-2023).

The district is less racially and ethnically diverse than the state in all indicators (see Table 2); 89% of all students that attend HVRSD schools are white. Low-income students make up 60.1% of enrollment; 25.6% are students with disabilities; 67.2% are considered “high needs.”

Race	% of District	% of State
African American	2.6	9.4
Asian	0.6	7.3
Hispanic	4.4	24.2
Native American	0.1	0.2
White	89	54.4
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.1	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.1	4.4

Table 2: HVRSD Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (2022-23)
Source: Massachusetts DESE, District and School Profile (2022-2023)

School Choice at HVRSD

Like many other states, Massachusetts has adopted statewide open enrollment policies that allow students to enroll in public schools outside their district (Godwin, R. K., & Kemerer, 2002). This inter-district school choice program allows families to enroll their children in a public school district that is not the child’s home district. Further, students also enroll at Charles T. McCann Technical School (McCann Tech), a regional school that provides vocationally focused educational services to the district towns of Adams, Cheshire, Clarksburg, Florida, Monroe, Savoy, Williamstown, and North Adams. While McCann Tech students are not technically considered “school choice” based on the regional agreement with Adams and Cheshire, the pull to McCann Tech has dramatically impacted Hoosac Valley Regional High School enrollment. Further, in 2008 an arts-based charter school was established in Adams, Berkshire Arts and Technology School (BART), which also draws enrollment from both towns. Additionally, St. Stanislaus Kostka School was founded by the Polish immigrants in Adams, Massachusetts in 1912 to serve as the center of their growing community. It has remained a

private school competitor to the HVRSD and has recently diversified to become a center for regional multi-ethnic Catholics, expanding beyond its Polish roots.

Problem of Practice

The organization assumes that the recently established arts-based charter school (BART), the local Catholic elementary school (St. Stanislaus Kostka), and a nearby CTE high school (McCann Tech) are drawing students away from their district, creating a cycle of loss involving students, courses, faculty, school spirit, morale, and community engagement. District administrators, families, students, faculty, staff, and community members are all invested stakeholders in addressing declining enrollment. Investigating and analyzing this problem is essential to keep the district viable over the coming decade.

In 2019, a new superintendent was hired after a series of three superintendents had one-to-two-year tenures from 2015-2019. Previously the district was led by a valued and respected superintendent who was in the position for thirteen years. Mr. Aaron Dean, the new superintendent, began examining the district's declining enrollment by administering exit interviews and surveys to staff, conducting needs assessments among current faculty and staff, and studying district demographic and course data. The district administration hopes to stop enrollment losses, recruit, and retain new students, faculty, and staff, and bring cohesiveness back to the community. They fear continuous decline creates a cycle that results in fewer taxpayer dollars. The subsequent loss of programming makes HVRSD a less attractive option for students in the region. While defining the problem has been the first step, identifying drivers and solutions is desperately needed to help turn this small district around.

A partnership between the researchers and the school district centered on collaboration with district leaders to lend resources and time to mixed-method research that could illuminate

drivers of enrollment declines and thus help create a plan of action to help sustain HVRSD. We set out to explore the push and pull factors associated with school choice in HVRSD. Smrekar (2009) refers to both “push” (reasons for exit) and “pull” (reasons for entry) factors as influencing parents’ school choice decisions. Push factors are the characteristics and conditions that exist or are perceived to exist within the district, while pull factors are the characteristics and conditions that exist or are perceived to exist in surrounding schools or districts.

Ultimately, we sought to understand why families decide to choose schools other than those within HVRSD. Student enrollment is a heavily weighted factor in the state’s foundational budget formula that determines how fiscal resources are allocated. Therefore, losing students negatively affects the ability of the district to formulate a budget that allows for closing achievement gaps, supporting the academic and social-emotional needs of all students, and meeting accountability targets. We went to the large body of school choice literature to learn and formulate important questions that have direct implications for the district.

Review of the Literature

This research synthesis reviews relevant literature on school choice as it relates to enrollment. We set out to learn why students and families choose alternatives to traditional local public-school options. We begin by defining school choice and then synthesize the historical and political perspectives that have combined to shape America’s school choice policies. We then examine the extant literature focused on the effect of these policies on rural school districts including the socioeconomic and demographic impacts. Finally, we look at the literature examining decision-making models that have been adapted to explore how consumers choose schools.

Defining School Choice

Ryan (2023) posits that parents increasingly can choose where their children attend school. Inter- and intra- district choice, the expansion of charter schools, and the introduction of voucher systems have led to a proliferation of school choice. The term “school choice” has several meanings that should be differentiated and explained to build an understanding of the concept. School choice includes voucher systems, charter schools, and open enrollment programs. Voucher systems include state-sponsored vouchers given to parents, who can transfer funds to a student’s school of choice, including both public and private schools (Streep, et al., 2006). There is no voucher system currently established in Massachusetts. However, a robust charter school program has taken root throughout the state. Charter schools, a second form of school choice, are public schools that students attend free of charge if they meet entrance criteria and are accepted to enroll. Charter schools are sometimes highly selective and specialized, focusing on specific academic areas, typically math, science, technology, or arts (Ryan, 2023). Finally, open enrollment programs allow students to choose to attend a public school outside of their traditionally designated district. In most cases, the receiving district school does not provide transportation, so the sending district is responsible for paying a school choice tax.

In 1991, Massachusetts aimed to improve educational quality by creating a free-market school choice system driven by parent decision-making (Choosing a School, 2019). Lawmakers established an open intra-district policy that makes all public schools in the state potential options for school choice. While this approach was introduced to promote competition among schools and thus improve school quality, there has been evidence that it contributes to the slow dismantling of public schools nationwide (Rhinesmith, 2017).

History of School Choice

Public school education is open to all U.S. residents. According to the most recent US Census, over ninety percent of the nation's age-eligible children are educated in public schools (2020). State laws require that children receive education through public schools or a state-approved private or home school. While public school options were once bound primarily by one's neighborhood, expanding school choice options through vocational, charter, and open enrollment policies has created a school marketplace with many available options. Together these policies have serious fiscal and equitable implications for public schools and been called "one of the most contentious policy areas in the United States" (Schneider & Buckley, p. 133, 2002).

Some have argued that school choice emerged as a policy option from the failures of other policies in achieving the racial integration of America's inner-city schools (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). Still, it had deeper roots in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Catholic immigration. Catholic leaders created America's first real alternative to public schools by creating educational opportunities that honored traditional Catholic traditions and religious practices (Streep et al., 2006).

Beyond parochial school choice, liberals pushed for alternative options concurrently with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Liberal politicians joined civil rights leaders and Black nationalists to envision school choice that established opportunities for underrepresented students, specifically the nation's poor and racially minoritized children. Beginning with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and reinforced by the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001 and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2002, school choice emerged reimagined as a free market solution to foster school improvement. Conservative lawmakers gravitated toward the idea that competition between schools would lead

to school improvement, which led to the development of state funded charter schools and voucher systems (Streep, et al., 2006).

Underpinning all school choice policy is the assumption that competition for enrollment serves as an improvement mechanism for all schools in an educational ecosystem and forces schools to close if they do not improve (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1953). This logic assumes that school choice improves educational experiences for all students, including those who don't participate in choice (Hoxby, 2001, 2003). The school choice movement gained traction as it promised better educational outcomes by offering opportunities to match schools and students based on their interests and needs (DeAngelis, 2019). However, critiques have emerged that challenge the logic that school choice improves educational experiences.

Literature challenges the suggestion that school choice leads to systemic academic improvement or improves student outcomes. Much has been written that suggests that competition causes many school districts to face financial strain (Arsen & Ni, 2012). Yet, choices are growing, and new choices are still emerging. While charter school enrollment is consistently less than 10% of eligible students, charter schools create a parallel public education system that affects enrollment in surrounding public schools (Knight, 2022). Charter school enrollment increases were initially seen in urban areas. Still, as more options enter the marketplace, more students and families choose charters (Knight, 2022). When combined with open enrollment policies, and options for vocational, parochial, and private schools, student enrollment patterns have significantly impacted academic and fiscal health of public schools.

Expanded Choice and Inequality in Rural Districts

School choice in rural areas is a subject that continues to be overlooked by researchers (Arnold, 2003). This gap may be because geographic isolation limits choice in rural areas.

However, as more states move towards open enrollment policies, more rural parents send their children to schools outside their home district. This makes sense as it has been argued that even outstanding rural schools cannot meet all students' needs with their limited resources, and there is a great need for educational alternatives (Arnold, 2003). Yet, rural school districts sometimes perceive and react to enrollment losses in ways that ultimately make them less competitive in the school market (Jabbar, 2015).

When districts lose students to school choice, it is coupled with a financial loss to the sending district. This raises the concern that school choice leaves rural public schools in a position where they can no longer serve their remaining students with high-quality programming (Arnold, 2003). Further, public schools play a disproportionate social, civic, and economic role in rural communities. Rural schools often help define their communities (Jakubowski, 2019). People who live in rural communities often remain loyal to their local schools, and many families have multi-generational alumni of the school system. Further, rural schools are often the largest employer in the areas they serve and have a significant socioeconomic impact on the areas they serve (Schafft, 2016).

It is still being determined whether rural schools can remain important community hubs if the resources and funding they have traditionally relied on are diverted to other schools because of school choice, particularly when those options are located outside of the area's geographic footprint (Arnold, 2003). The result of school choice in rural areas may be a weakening of the role of local schools to provide an identity, connection, and cohesiveness that helps hold communities together. While little research has been dedicated to rural school choice, much research regarding school choice in urban school communities has been thoroughly explored.

Despite the different contexts, research within urban areas can provide an effective preliminary framework for understanding how school choice policy affects public school systems in general.

Demographics of School Choice

Another area of literature necessary to review is focused on the demographics of who participates in the school choice marketplace. Individual demographic and socioeconomic factors constrain parents' choices and have a role in the decision-making process. Multiple studies indicate that parents consider a school's demographic profile when making decisions, especially considering race and income levels (Smrekar, 2019). Additionally, these demographic factors may influence whether families remain in a school once their children attend.

Godwin and Kemerer (2002) suggest that the higher a family's socioeconomic status, the more likely a child will participate in school-choice programs. They concluded that low-income families have less access to information about school choice and less access to the transportation often required to attend schools outside their proximity. In explaining the implications of this phenomenon, the authors suggest that school choice creates the conditions to "exacerbate existing segregation by race, social class, and cultural background because the value families place on education correlates highly with race, class, and cultural background" (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002, p. 24).

Examining the potential impact school choice has on the students who remain in their home schools starts with determining the demographics of the families opting out. One group of researchers writes,

High-achieving students with educationally involved parents are more likely to take advantage of expanded school choices than disadvantaged students with less active parents, with the result being higher concentrations of the most motivated and able

students in some schools. The second related hypothesis is that these more advantaged students are especially likely to opt out of schools with large concentrations of disadvantaged students and low levels of achievement (Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009, p. 139).

Similarly, in a study of school choice in Chicago, Cullen et al. (2005) suggest that those students who participated in school choice had high levels of academic achievement and were less likely to have school discipline records than students not choosing to opt-out. In other cities, other studies have found that students who participate in open enrollment are less likely to be eligible for free lunch and have parents with higher levels of educational attainment (Lavery & Carlson, 2015). This matters because the demographic composition of a school impacts students' academic success. Students in high-poverty schools have a higher risk of academic failure than those in low-poverty schools; they also have a reduced chance of engaging with academically successful peers and being taught by highly qualified teachers (Gilbert, 2017). It is worth noting that school choice may be a homogenizing agent that is deepening the equity divide that it was designed to alleviate. This research raises the concern that school choice could add inequity into the educational system rather than acting as a mechanism of equity.

Another demographic implication of school choice is that different groups have unequal access to the information necessary to make decisions. Over a decade after implementing the state-wide open enrollment policy, Howell (2006) surveyed Massachusetts families and discovered that only 52 percent knew they could opt out of failing schools. Similarly, the same research suggests parents with higher levels of education and those who were homeowners were more likely to be aware of their school choice options.

Schools may also be positioned differently in the school choice market depending on their demographic composition. Wasserman and Faust (1994) surfaced evidence that the demographic make-up of schools directly impacted their status as schools of choice. High-status schools tended to be schools that served higher income families and a higher percentage of white students. However, they also noted that status can also arise from being part of a prominent charter network or having high achievement. The reality of a school's awareness of their status in the school choice market has real implications for long- and short-term planning. This is important because non-choice school leaders may feel they cannot compete, whereas schools at the top might feel they are "above the fray" which can lead to different budgetary priorities (Ladd & Fiske, 2003). Even when principals are aware that they are losing students to other schools, they may not be able to identify those schools or respond in productive ways because of a lack of resources (Holme et al., 2013).

Parent decision-making and school choice

One set of researchers succinctly addresses a significant assumption that underlies much of the school choice literature: "It is worth noting that most of the literature on school choice presumes that parents make these decisions" (Corcoran & Jennings, 2019, p.367). While there are several major studies that explore students as decision-makers in secondary schools, most of the literature around school choice decision-making focuses on parents as the ultimate decision-makers.

The literature generalizes parents into two groups based on how they perceive themselves and their relationship with schools. First, parents who engage in school choice see themselves as active consumers who feel knowledgeable in making educational decisions. Second, some parents feel educators are experts, and they are passive participants in their child's educational

experience (Godwin & Kemerer, 2002). Schockaert (2014) compiled survey results from three cities (San Antonio, St. Louis, and San Francisco) and drew further patterns that suggested parents who choose “tended to be aggressively involved in their child’s education” and that those who do not consider alternative options felt “teachers know better than the parent what type of school is best for a child” (p.38). Ultimately, parents who feel they are knowledgeable consumers who know what’s best for their children end up engaging in the school choice marketplace.

Not surprisingly, parents who are unsatisfied with their child’s school may be more likely to seek out alternative options. When they do, school choice literature addresses several key elements considered by parents when selecting a school for their child, including factors such as proximity (distance and travel time), demographic makeup, academic quality (test scores, teacher quality), social capital (having friends or networked peers in schools), and safety (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Bosetti, 2007, Corcoran & Jennings, 2019). In a study based in Massachusetts, Armor and Peiser (1998) found that parents pointed to high academic standards, curriculum, and facilities as the three most common reasons for choosing other schools. As already noted, Smrekar (2009) refers to both “push” (reasons for exit) and “pull” (reasons for entry) factors that lead to school choice. Specifically, she mentions teacher quality, safety, and school location as the most salient factors influencing parents’ school choice decisions.

Many researchers agree that a parent’s dissatisfaction with local public schools may lead them to seek a different school. There is general agreement on the factors that lead to engaging in the school choice process. There is disagreement on where parents get their information and whether they use it to make the most rational decisions. For example, Berends (2019) notes a recent study that found suburban parents rely heavily on social networks but also often “do their

research on schools” (p.352). This pushes against a strand of earlier research that found higher-income families tended to rely only on networks and not gather independent research. Either way, Schneider and Buckley (2002) made an essential contribution to the literature when they suggested that the educationally sound preferences parents reported they used to make decisions were not actually the data points that parents sought out when making those decisions. Parents tended to make decision based on noneducational factors they called “ancillary or irrelevant school characteristics” (p.134). These characteristics included the racial and socio-economic composition of the school.

Models of school choice decision making

Schneider and Buckley’s (2002) two-stage framework of school choice proposes that school choosers are first pushed to consider alternative options based on conditions at their child’s current school. They are only then pulled to more attractive options based on desired features in schools of choice. However, researchers have identified push factors as being more powerful in decision-making (Berends, 2019). It seems that once push factors have made parents enter the decision-making stage, pull factors aid them in selecting.

Ultimately, selecting schools is remarkably similar across social classes and geography. Parents choose and then consider a limited number of schools out of the possible options. It is important to note that all parents’ choice sets are bound somehow. Berend’s research (2019) proposes a model contrary to a rational model of parent decision-making. He suggests that decision-makers are often irrational and fail to make the “right” decisions using traditional markers of successful schools. (i.e., selecting the schools with the highest test scores). This may be because only viable options are considered, and this limited choice set can vary in quality (Jabbar, 2015). The quality of schools selected is often not due to a rational choice process as

parents rely on their social networks to obtain information about schools and do not always verify the accuracy of information.

Early conceptions of school choice decision-making relying on economic decision-making theory have proven unrealistic. Rational choice theory demands “parents [to be] rational actors, [who can] evaluate all schooling options completely, making complex calculations involving their preferences and outcome probabilities” (Schafft, 2016, p. 352). This economic decision-making model posits that families choose what is in their best self-interest and maximize potential benefits for their children (Berend, 2019). This model assumes that parents will “evaluate their schooling options completely, making complex calculations involving their preferences and outcome probabilities” (Berend, 2019, p. 352). However, using a purely economic model is problematic as it does not fully consider social contexts, varying access to and reliability of information used in decision-making, or cognitive biases that all have been shown to influence the extraordinarily complex reality of school choice decision-making (Berend, 2019).

When parents choose schools, they will likely not consider every school they have access to. Parents do not have unlimited time, complete access to all relevant data needed to make fully informed decisions, or the capacity to consider every schooling option that may be a possibility. First proposed by Simon (2000), “bounded rationality” begins with an assumption that human beings cannot take account of all possibilities and their outcomes when they make a choice. Researchers have leaned towards a model of bounded rationality when discussing school choice. In this decision-making model, “Parents rarely have the capacity to carefully consider all schools and weigh all options against one another. Instead, they “satisfice,” selecting schools that they

deem reasonable from the options they are able to consider” (Bell, 2009). This model will be explored in more detail below through our conceptual framework.

Summary of Literature Review

In the post-No Child Left Behind Act era and the recent reauthorization of Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, the emphasis on giving parents options in the educational marketplace has become a priority for many districts (Ellison and Aloe, 2018). Whether they know it or not, parents have been given the power to choose what schools their children can attend. School choice policies are based on the belief that when given options, parents will base their decisions on the factors that determine the quality of the education schools provide, measured by assessment scores and other accountability factors. The logic, therefore, is that in a competitive marketplace, schools are incentivized to improve or face the reality of failure (Ellison and Aloe, 2018). However, the decision-making process is complex and, sometimes, irrational, with parents often considering demographic and nonacademic factors over sound analysis of educational outcomes. This has high-stakes consequences for school districts on the receiving and sending ends of the school-choice equation.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, we have developed a conceptual framework that explores the factors of school choice decision-making within a model of bounded rationality. First, we present the model framework and then we conceptualize the variables that frame our research design.

In the model below, parents enter the decision-making process when push factors trigger exploring other school options. This leads parents through a decision-making process driven by bounded rationality, in which parents “satisfice,” or decide on the most reasonable school from

the options they can consider. Overall, bounded rationality allows for the reality that school choice decisions are highly contextualized, time-bound, and nuanced while also providing a framework for researchers to consider the factors influencing rational decision-making. Our framework helps explain how push and pull factors, limited access to information, and temporal and cognitive limitations can lead to school choice decisions.

School choice decision-making in a bounded rationality framework

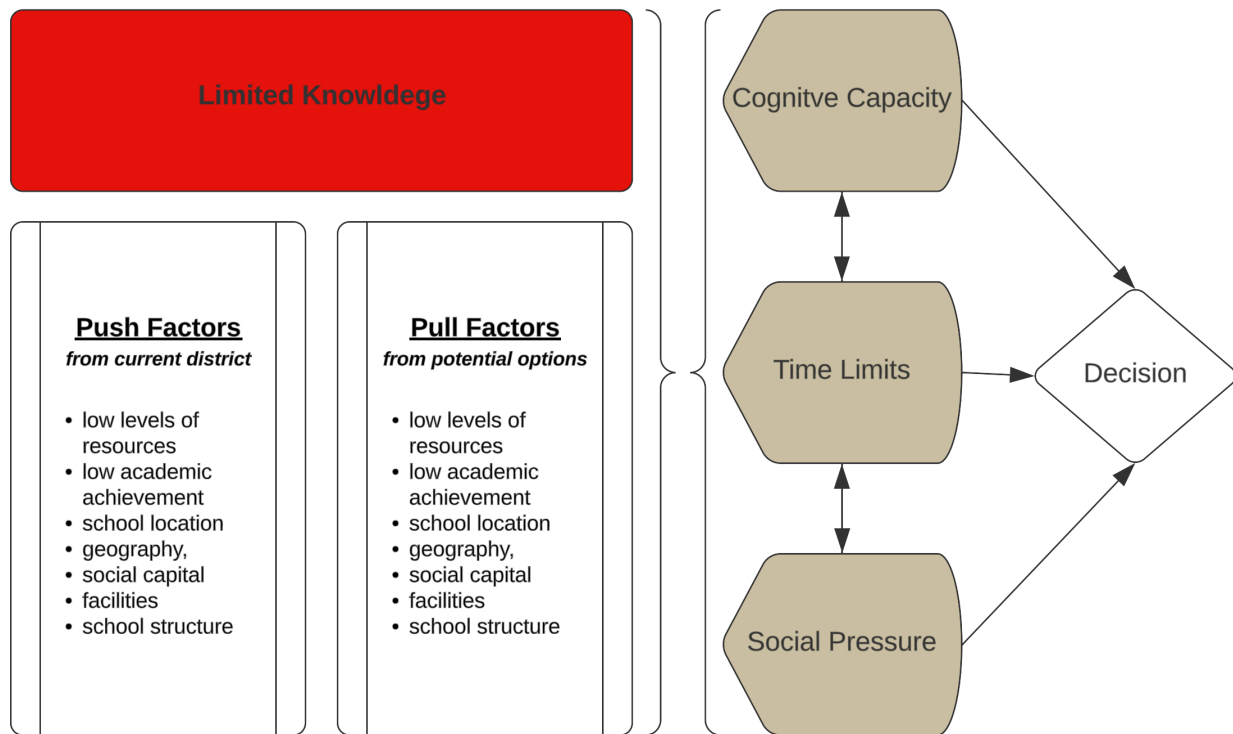


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 3, decision-makers have access to limited knowledge about both their current school (push factors) and their potential school choice options (pull factors). Armed with this knowledge, parents make a decision that is further bounded by their cognitive capacity (limited by what they know), time limits, and pressures coming from friends, family, and social expectations to make the best decision possible.

Conceptualizations of key school choice factors

To understand the interplay between the push factors that lead to entering the school choice decision-making process and the pull factors that are used to evaluate other options, several key factors must be conceptualized. As explored in the literature review, the following are the most common push and pull factors: perceptions of disorder, overcrowding, levels of resources, academic achievement, school location and geography, social capital (peers, demographics, and diversity), facilities, and school structure (Aloe, 2018; Smekar, 2009).

School choice factor	Conceptualized definition
Perceptions of Disorder	A perception held by stakeholders, particularly parents and community members of an increase of behavior and discipline issues in schools. This can lead to decreased enrollment, student absenteeism, decreased teacher quality, and increased negative emotions (Yavas, 2020).
Levels of Resources	Measured differences in resources including number and quality of programs and services offered, levels of teacher qualifications and experience, teacher salaries, average class size, and expenditures per student (Cuccaro-Alamin, 1997).
Academic Achievement	Academic achievement can be measured by traditional grading, standardized test scores, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance,” (York et al., 2015).
Social Capital	The “relationships between students, families, communities, and teachers available to support and motivate students’ academic success” (Croniger, 2001).
Facilities	The “buildings and equipment, structures, and special educational use areas that are built, installed, or established to serve primarily educational purposes” (LawInsider, 2023).
School Structures	The foundation on which the school system is built: school entrance age, compulsory education, duration of different school levels, curriculum, even textbook and other resources (Popov, 2012).

Research Questions

1. What push factors within HVRSD are causing parents and students to initiate school choice?

2. What are the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the students and families choosing to leave?
3. What are the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the students and families choosing to stay?

Project Design

The project was designed to explore what factors contribute to school choice decision-making when families choose to enroll in schools outside of HVRSD. This design aimed to investigate how school choice is affecting enrollment within HVRSD and to create recommendations and suggest interventions that can be implemented to help increase enrollment in the district. We employed an exploratory sequential design, a mixed methods approach through which qualitative data collection and analysis occur first followed by quantitative data collection and analysis.

We targeted two research populations: school and district leadership and school choice decision-makers. We first conducted focus groups, developed our hypotheses based on an analysis of the transcripts using our conceptual framework, and then used available quantitative data to confirm or question our results. We collected public data found on the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website along with internal data shared by HVRSD focused on school-age population data, local demographic and economic data information on students' race, free and reduced lunch status, special education status, MCAS proficiency levels. Our dual analysis focused on identifying the most salient push and pull factors contributing to school choice numbers at HVRSD and relevant demographic elements.

Participant Recruitment and Sample

Focus group participants were drawn from a convenience sample of parents, guardians, and family members of current and former students. Some participants were also current or former staff members at HVRSD. Focus group participants were formed by working collaboratively with the HVRSD Family Engagement Coordinator, who canvased current school

choice families for those willing to participate. From that group of potential participants, we chose families representative of all the school choice options currently taken by potential HVRSD families. This included students who left the district before starting elementary and those who had left during elementary, middle, and high school levels. Several participants

	<i>Current School</i>	<i>Current Grade</i>	<i>Attended HVRSD</i>	<i>Focus Group</i>
<i>Student 1</i>	St. Stanislaus	5	Yes, PreK-3	1
<i>Student 2</i>	St. Stanislaus	4	Yes, 3 rd grade only	1
<i>Student 3</i>	BART	8	Yes, K-5	1
<i>Student 4</i>	St. Stanislaus	3	Yes, PreK-1	1
<i>Student 5</i>	HVRSD	6	First year, transfer	1
<i>Student 6</i>	McCann Tech	9	Yes, K-8	1
<i>Student 7</i>	HVRSD	6	Yes, K-6	1
<i>Student 8</i>	CBRSD	3	No	1
<i>Student 9</i>	CBRSD	2	No	1
<i>Student 10</i>	Abbot Memorial	5	No	1
<i>Student 11</i>	HVRSD	1	Yes, but transferring	2
<i>Student 12</i>	McCann Tech	12	Yes, transferred in 9	2
<i>Student 13</i>	Abbott Memorial	4	No	2
<i>Student 14</i>	HVRSD	6	K-6, transferring	2
<i>Student 15</i>	BART	7	K-6	2
<i>Student 16</i>	HVRSD	3	PreK-3, considering	2
<i>Student 17</i>	BART	6	K-5	2

Table 3: Enrollment of students represented in focus groups

were parents of both students who opted out of HVRSD and those currently enrolled in HVRSD. Several participants had chosen the school choice option for one or more grades and then returned to HVRSD. Participants represented students in other local public, private, parochial, charter, and vocational schools. Table 3 shows the enrollment patterns for the students whose parent(s), guardian, or caregivers participated in a focus group. To ensure the confidentiality of

the focus group participants, family members are not explicitly linked to the students they discussed.

Data Collection

The primary data collection instruments were focus group questions that can be found below and a series of interviews with key stakeholders. Throughout the months of April and May 2023, focus groups were facilitated, and an interview was conducted the superintendent of schools.

Focus Groups

This research study conducted focus groups with various stakeholders to better understand why families remain or leave school. We partnered with the HVRSD Family Engagement Coordinator to create focus groups that represented all the current school choice options for HVRSD families. We then set up times for focus groups and accommodated families by conducting the meetings both in-person at the local high school and simultaneously via zoom.

Two focus groups were conducted in-person with a total of 13 participating family members who represented 17 HVSRD students currently enrolled in another district (n=12), students planning to attend another district during the 2023-2024 school year (n=5) or had chosen another district and returned to HVRSD (n=2). A letter was sent to all potential participants (see Appendix I) that examined interview protocols, shared the interview questions, and shared the methodology we would use to inform our quantitative findings.

The questions focused on the perceived family motivations for selecting either a public school in a different district, charter, parochial, or technical school instead of HVSRD and provided information about families choosing to leave HVSRD. The interview protocols for families also probed current perceptions of HVSRD and the impact the perceived quality of

schools had on decision-making. Some of the questions in this protocol explored ways in which the departure of students from HVSRD impacts the community, its reputation, and its future.

Focus Group Questions

1. What were the biggest factors that prompted your family to switch from Hoosac Valley?
2. What factors did you consider when choosing a different school for your child? What were the most important issues? (e.g., teachers, other families/students, caring climate, safety, proximity to home/work...)
3. Did you speak to teachers, school administrators, or other school staff about your concerns before you decided to leave? Were other alternatives provided or presented to you/discussed with you by school officials when this option came to light? What could have been presented differently to change your decision to leave?
4. What were/are the biggest concerns you had/have about your child changing schools?
5. When considering options for school choice, where did you get your information about your options? (Internet, word of mouth, site visits, etc....).
6. When considering options for school choice, who did you talk to about your options, and how did they influence your decision?
7. What drew you to this school? Why this (charter, CTE, parochial, or other public) school?
8. Now that you have decided to choice out, is the current school meeting your expectations?
9. If there was one thing Hoosac Valley could change to retain more students, what do you think that should be?

Data Analysis

This study included data from two focus groups involving families of students involved in school choice and one interview with the current superintendent, Mr. Aaron Dean. As planned through our exploratory sequential design, the qualitative responses were first analyzed to create focus areas and hypotheses for our finds. A qualitative analysis of both focus group transcripts was conducted, with dominant themes from the conceptual framework depicted in the transcripts and coded accordingly. These themes were explored through an analysis of relevant quantitative data to determine push and pull factors influencing school choice numbers in the district.

Focus Group Analysis

The recordings of the focus groups were transcribed using the artificial intelligence program Otter.ai to generate a text transcript. After reviewing and editing the transcript for errors and ensuring that each speaker was correctly identified, the transcripts were converted into editable documents that the researchers used to conduct the qualitative coding. Based on the literature review and conceptual framework discussed above, researchers coded the transcript to understand better push factors within HVRSD.

Table 4 shows the frequency of the indicators in the coded transcripts. Push factors from the conceptual framework were those indicators that we expected to emerge from our focus groups based on the assumptions derived from our literature review. Push factors that emerged from our focus groups were those themes that were present in our analysis, but were not explicitly mentioned in the school-choice literature as push factors. For a breakdown of each focus group transcript and examples of representative quotations for each indicator see Appendix II and Appendix III, respectively.

Push Factors from Conceptual Framework	<i>n</i>	Other Push Factors that Emerged from Focus Groups	<i>n</i>
1. Perceptions of disorder	47	7. Communication	16
2. Levels of resources	29	8. Identity	6
3. Academic achievement	21	9. Leadership consistency	7
4. Social capital	15		
5. School structure / facilities	16		
6. School location	6		

Table 4: Frequency of qualitative Codes used in coding transcripts.

After ranking the nine themes in order of frequency, five dominant themes emerged from the focus groups: perceptions of disorder, levels of resources, academic achievement, communication, school structures and facilities, communication, and leadership consistency. We then examined quantitative reports related to these themes, including the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education’s *Official Accountability Reports, School and District Performance Summaries, and District Report Cards*. Together, these resources provide the public access to all data collected by the state through mandatory reporting practices. Our findings explore the six most salient themes that emerged from our qualitative analysis and are discussed in relation to relevant quantitative data.

Findings

Perceptions of disorder

A driving factor in considering other school districts is the perception of disorder within HVRSD and that student behavior is affecting the social emotional well-being and academic success of all students.

The most salient theme (n=47) to emerge from our focus group analysis was that perceptions of disorder within the HVRSD schools was a significant push factor leading to school choice. We defined perceptions of disorder as a perception held by stakeholders, particularly parents and community members, of an increase of behavior and discipline issues in schools (Yavas, 2022). This was important to explore because when parents and community

members develop these perceptions of chaos or disorder, it can lead to decreased enrollment, student absenteeism, a decrease in teacher quality, and increase of negative emotions of students, teachers, and families (Yavas, 2022). These effects were present in the comments made during our focus groups and were later supported through analysis of suspension data.

One parent likened her daughter's everyday classroom experience to watching a television program. She said, "when she first came [to Hoosac] she would come home and be like you can't guess what happened... It was almost like fun because she said it was like a TV show, you know, like she had never experienced. The behavior was that bad" (Parent 3, FG1). Another parent of a student who had transferred to Hoosac Elementary for one year said of his one year at Hoosac:

You know the teacher was great, and he really liked it. But he just talked about the stealing going on all the time. And you know, just there are a lot of behavioral issues that he had never really encountered before. [group chatter "there are a lot of behavioral issues going on..."] which took away from his experiences (Parent 2a, FG1).

Another participant noted that she felt, "the children are dictating the way that the classroom setting is going, and that's not respectful" (Parent 1, FG1).

Other participants had more specific examples of disciplinary concerns having a negative effect on the social emotional well-being and academic progress of their students. For example, one parent reported:

...she comes home exhausted from school as a fifth grader because the behavior is so incredibly bad that she just she's so frustrated. She's like, "the other classes are all the way through their book, and we can't because they just have to keep stopping to deal with

other kids... She's got one teacher that walks out crying all the time. That's awful. I feel bad for her, but also that's not professional. I mean, I don't know (Parent 4a, FG1).

Other examples of disorder included students bringing weapons to school. Participants reported:

Twice last year kids brought knives to school... prior to that my son has had classes where kids are disruptive and violent... And so it's impacting their safety, what they can learn, what they feel good about going to school for... and I hear it when he comes home, and that's kind of scary as a parent (Parent 2, FG2).

Another example included a student throwing a water bottle at their teacher, “discipline now is like they can only do so much... and then they just act out again, and then we've got 10-year-olds throwing water bottles at their teacher right during class... that would have never happened in my day” (Parent 4a/b, FG1).

Finally, two of the participants noted that instances of what they defined as bullying led directly to their decision to choose another school. One parent stated:

The most important thing to me is that I'm sending my kids to a place every day where I feel like people care about them. And I don't feel like that's the way they roll here. There you go. My daughter was bullied. I had multiple meetings. I asked for forms. I did a whole bunch of stuff. It continued on as mercilessly bullying, and that's crap. I came in here and tried to be a nice guy, and not make a thing out of it, but at some point, you gotta make a thing out of it. Like that's your kid's safety (Parent 1, FG2).

Discipline data

To examine the theme of disorder, we analyzed two statistics reported to DESE: the percentage of students suspended in school and the percentage of students suspended out of school at least once. HVRSD discipline was historically higher than the state average across all

available years, except the most recent data which placed Hoosac Valley at the same level as the state average. Below are two tables representing the findings:

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<i>HVRSD</i>	5.20%	4.10%	5.00%	2.30%	0.30%
<i>State</i>	1.70%	1.80%	1.90%	1.20%	0.30%
<i>Difference</i>	3.50%	2.30%	3.10%	1.10%	0.00%

Table 5: Percentage of students suspended in-school

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<i>HVRSD</i>	2.80%	2.70%	5.00%	3.60%	0.90%
<i>State</i>	2.80%	2.90%	3.00%	2.00%	0.50%
<i>Difference</i>	0.00%	-0.20%	2.00%	1.6%	0.40%

Table 6: Percentage of students suspended out-of-school

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

During the same period there was only one state reported finding of bullying within the HVRSD, which was reported for the 2020-2021 school year; all other years included zero reports of bullying in each school in the district.

Perception of low levels of resources

Low levels of fiscal resources have created a perception that other districts have more and higher quality academic and nonacademic programming than HVRSD.

A second theme that emerged (n=29) throughout our focus group was a perception of low levels of resources across the district. This was supported by our interview with Superintendent Dean and was further illuminated through a descriptive analysis of HVRSD historic budget allocations, staffing levels, and other fiscal indicators such as per pupil spending, and spending above the foundational budget. We coded for this element anytime participants brought up issues regarding the financial or human resources allocated across the district. The National Center for Education Statistics notes that equity in education often is determined by either high or low levels of resources. These can be measured by examining the quality of programs and services

offered, levels of teacher qualifications and experience, teacher salaries, average class size, and expenditures per student (Cuccaro-Alamin, 1997).

This issue was best summarized by a participant who said, “this district is always struggling with the budget... school choice was kind of a no brainer for us” (Parent 2b, FG1). Another parent added, “... budget cuts every year... and now we go to the charter school, and they have music... all new facilities and great technology (Parent 2a, FG1). Another added:

I hate to say this because I don't know what to be done, but it really comes down largely, I think, to money for this district. They just don't have the resources to do the things that they need to do... so more kids are leaving (Parent 4, FG2).

The problem of low levels of resources first entered the conversation when a focus group participant noted that the middle school, “[has] a playground, but they didn't have staffing for recess... I'm like well, you have a playground, you have to have staff” (Parent 4, FG2). Two other participants, both former employees of the district, offered other perspective on the lack of resources:

For nine years I was a middle school music specialist, and I taught middle school social studies for three years and so the concerning thing is that I saw as a faculty member [and] the reasons that I didn't send my kid... I was teaching music at the time to CT Plunket and had 700 students, and then I was up here, too, with high school teaching course and I just got spread so thin that I couldn't take it anymore... (Parent 4, FG2).

Another participant noted that behavioral support staff is lacking: “You know that the support staff... for kids that are struggling with behaviors... I think, is lacking, my kid talks about other students throwing stuff all over the place...” (Parent 4, FG1). Even athletics, which historically had been a draw to HVRSD seem to be recently underfunded. Speaking of another school a

participant said, “but you know they’re better or more well-funded, they like have a hockey team now!” (Parent 2, FG1). Finally, another noted that there was perception that other surrounding districts were better funded, “now this other school has all the money and all the programs and through word of mouth we’ve heard wonderful things... like. I haven’t a met a kid who has gone there who has been unhappy” (Parent 4, FG1).

Total Per Pupil Expenditures

The quantitative data also told a story of a district struggling with fiscal resources. The first fiscal indicator explored was total per pupil expenditures. During the past five years, HVRSD spent an average of \$2,009 less per student than the state average (see Figure 4).

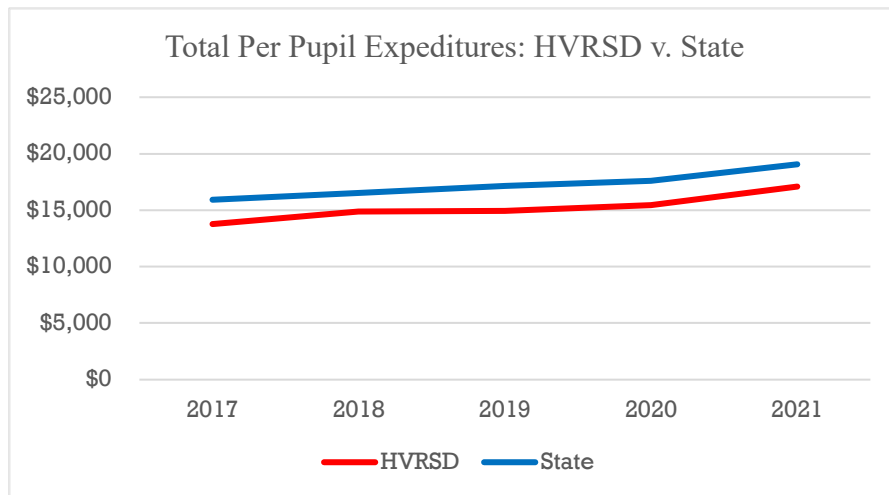


Figure 4: Total Per Pupil Expenditures, HVRSD v. State

Source: Massachusetts DESE, District and School Profile: Finance (2017-2021)

Percent actual net school spending above/under foundation budget

Another fiscal indicator supporting the conclusion that HVRSD is under-resourced compared to other districts across the state is a comparison of spending above or below the state-mandated foundational budget. The foundational budget is a fixed number that establishes the minimum for contributions for local towns using a formula that accounts for enrollment, tax revenue, and property values. Typically, districts that spend higher percentages over their foundational budgets have higher levels of academic achievement. In the five most recent years

that data was available (2016-2020), HVRSD averaged 15% below the state average of spending above foundational budgets (see Figure 5).

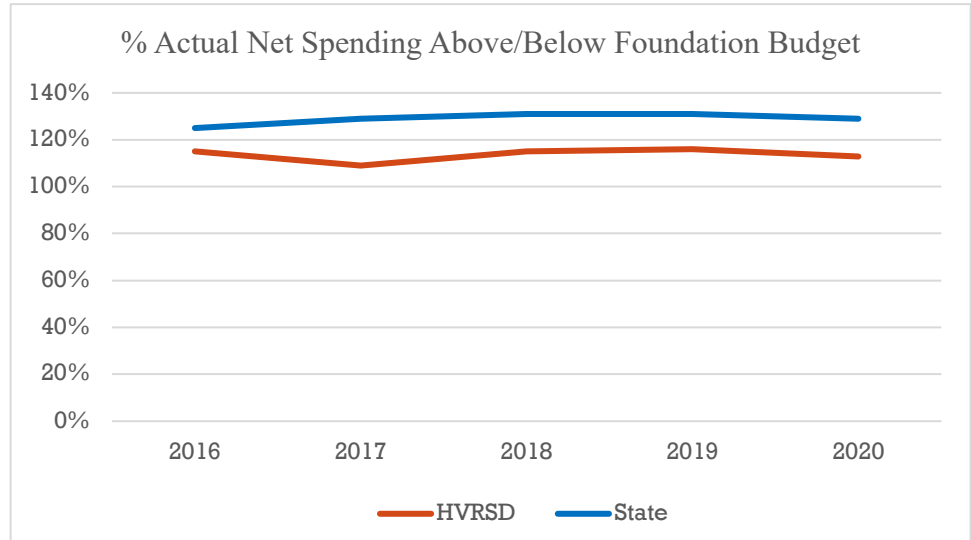


Figure 5: % Actual Net Spending Above or Below Foundation Budgets, HVRSD v State
Source: Massachusetts DESE, District and School Profile: Finance (2017-2021)

Finally, another

quantitative measure

regarding human resources is the student to teacher ratio. Typically, higher performing schools have lower student to teacher ratio. Over the past five years (2018-2022) HVRSD has had a higher student to teacher ratio (13.08:1) than the state average (12.5:1).

Low academic achievement

Low academic achievement and concern over student outcomes is a push factor that contributes to families choosing other districts over HVRSD.

Participants in our focus groups pointed to low academic achievement in the district as being a push factor that contributed to their decisions to choose other districts (n=21). Our operationalized definition of academic achievement included engagement in educationally purposeful activities, acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance (York et al., 2015). Therefore, a descriptive quantitative analysis was subsequently completed that included historic MCAS scores, accountability percentiles, graduation rates, reported plans of high school graduates, and graduates attending higher education.

Low academic achievement was mentioned by most focus group participants. Some focused on lack of rigor in the classroom. One participant noted, “That’s why I pulled [student]. She was reading in class [when she wasn’t supposed to be]. She was drawing in class. And she had a 100. We were trying to push her, but she was reading novels in math class” (Parent 5, FG2). Another concurred when he said:

I would agree... My kids had straight A’s here, and as they move to another educational setting, they are struggling because what was the academic standard here is far below what the academic standard there... So that’s a huge problem (Parent 1, FG2).

Another parent worried that his son had been “consistently ahead of his class” but because the “standards that they’re educating the students, I think it [are] lagging...” they were “starting to see his benchmarks go down because most of the other students are behind him, and teachers can’t teach to the standard” (Parent 2, FG2). A mother said, “I know she’s not getting what she needs here, and my other children will never switch [to Hoosac]... I’m afraid to switch her back [to the other school] because I think she will be an entire year behind if I switch her back” (Parent 3, FG1).

Several parents spoke of “compliance-based grading” and said that students in the district tend to “get graded on doing the bare minimum of what they have to do...” (Parent 3, FG1).

They alluded to classroom instruction not meeting standards, when another parent said:

... [my daughter] will do every bit of her work. and then she’ll get, you know all 100s, and then she’ll take a test, and she’ll get a 40. You’re not learning. If you’re taking a test, and you’re getting a 40, you don’t deserve an A. Like I’m glad she’s getting great grades... she’s feeling very self-confident. But, if she’s not retaining that information, where is the teaching, you know (Parent 4, FG1)?

Other parents worried about standardized testing. Several mentioned the district’s lagging scores on the state MCAS exams in comments like, “we did our research too... not great test scores” (Parent 2, FG1). While others lamented over the focus on state testing preparation that she perceived was driving instruction at the elementary school. She said, “testing in my opinion it very stressful... and I’m referring to MCAS testing... our school does not have MCAS testing... so that was another huge part of my decision” (Parent 1, FG1).

Academic Data

State testing scores revealed that when ELA and Mathematics scores are combined the district averages 13% fewer students scoring meeting or exceeding expectations than the state average. As represented below (see Table 7), HVRSD student results in grades 3-8 are consistently underperforming compared to the state in both ELA (16% below state averages) and Mathematics (23% below state averages). It should be noted that there was no testing given in 2020. The high school data set also is missing data from 2018, as the district opted to take PARCC testing, an alternate state-approved assessment between 2016-2018 (See Tables 9 and 10).

MCAS Analysis (Elementary and Middle)

ELA (3-8)	2018	2019	2021	2022
<i>N</i>	610	581	522	490
<i># exceeding or meeting</i>	243	189	150	122
<i>% exceeding or meeting</i>	40%	33%	29%	25%
<i>% EX/M State</i>	51%	52%	46%	41%
<i>Difference b/t HVRSD/State</i>	-11%	-19%	-17%	-16%

Table 7: Percent Exceeding or Meeting English Language Arts MCAS (Grades 3-8)

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

Mathematics (3-8)	2018	2019	2021	2022
<i>N</i>	609	582	523	487
<i># exceeding or meeting</i>	145	146	63	80
<i>% exceeding or meeting</i>	24%	25%	12%	16%
<i>% EX/M State</i>	48%	49%	33%	39%
<i>Difference b/t HVRSD/State</i>	-24%	-24%	-21%	-23%

Table 8: Percent Exceeding or Meeting Mathematics MCAS (Grades 3-8)

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

MCAS Analysis (High School)

ELA (10)	2019	2021	2022
<i>N</i>	47	47	48
<i># exceeding or meeting</i>	29	29	25
<i>% exceeding or meeting</i>	62%	62%	52%
<i>% EX/M State</i>	61%	64%	58%
<i>Difference b/t HVRSD/State</i>	1%	-2%	-6%

Table 9: Percent Exceeding or Meeting English Language Arts MCAS (Grade 10)

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

Mathematics (10)	2019	2021	2022
<i>N</i>	45	45	47
<i># exceeding or meeting</i>	25	17	22
<i>% exceeding or meeting</i>	56%	38%	47%
<i>% EX/M State</i>	59%	52%	50%
<i>Difference b/t HVRSD/State</i>	-3%	-14%	-3%

Table 10: Percent Exceeding or Meeting Mathematics MCAS (Grade 10)

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

Graduation Rates and Plans after graduation

As shown in Tables 11 and 12 below, HVRSD graduation rates between the years of 2018-2019 were higher than state averages, with dropout rates lower than state averages. However, between 2020-2022, HVRSD graduation rates have declined below state averages, while drop-out rates have risen above state averages. Similarly, for all years between 2017-2021, the average percentage of graduating students who attended a two- or four-year public or private

college or university has gone from .2% below state average to 5.9% below state averages (See Table 13).

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
HVRSD	88.00%	89.80%	84.00%	83%	84.70%
State	87.90%	88.00%	89%	89.80%	90.10%
	0.10%	1.80%	-5.00%	-6.80%	-5.40%

Table 11: Percent Graduated in 4 years

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
HVRSD	3.60%	4.50%	6.70%	10.60%	8.30%
State	4.80%	5.30%	4.70%	4.60%	4.80%
	-1.20%	-0.80%	2.00%	6.00%	3.50%

Table 12: Dropout Rate: HVRSD v State

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
HVRSD	73.4%	66.3%	63.8%	61.2%	56.8%
State	73.6%	72.3%	72.2%	64.0%	62.7%
	-0.2%	-6.0%	-8.4%	-2.8%	-5.9%

Table 13: Graduates Attending Colleges and Universities

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; District Report Card

School structures and facilities

A perception driving school choice is that district facilities are deteriorating, and current limitations necessitate nontraditional age groupings at the elementary and middle schools.

Another finding that emerged from our focus groups (n=16) centered around school structure, specifically the age groupings at the middle school were a push factor in considering school choice, along with the perception that the district facilities were aging and in need of repair. The conversations related to this finding were generally around understanding the need for a unique structure based on the facility's reality. Still, many questioned if it best served students.

When discussing the 4-7 grade level structure, one participant talked about the reality of fourth graders having to navigate high school behaviors:

To say that my fourth Grader is going to be up here with [high schoolers], you know, I understand things like that are going to happen (referring to high school discipline).

Yeah, you know, I get that. That being said, it's (violence in schools) much more likely, statistically to happen in a high school environment, and a fourth grader is not going to know what the hell to do in that situation, no matter how much training you give to them (Parent 3, FG2).

Similarly, another participant questioned why one of the two elementary schools was not expanded to accommodate more students. She said, "It [would have been] a better situation to be expanded to keep all elementary school students because 6 great is elementary" (Parent 4, FG2). Other parents again alluded to the safety of the school structure by adding, "Yeah, all elementary school students should be on one campus. I don't feel safe bringing my child to a high school" (Parent 5, FG2).

Several families said that they questioned the classroom sizes at the middle and high schools and whether they were adequately welcoming for elementary-aged children. One said, "One reason we decided to go to was very small classrooms. It was an intimate setting. It was literally like a family. My children were at that age in kindergarten and first grade and so at that age I just really thought the attention and the small classroom setting, the family style etiquette was what they needed (Parent 1, FG1).

When talking about the elementary school, one parent said he was surprised that the building in Adams was chosen for the location of the school. He said,

It never even should have been considered for continued use. It's a declining building that is going to have to be replaced. I question the safety of it. I'll tell you right now today at pick up line to pick up my child and they were doing work on the roof (Parent 4, FG1).

Another parent added that even at the newer high school, “You know they're constantly having issues, the roof is constantly leaking” (Parent 1, FG2).

Analysis of Statewide Grade Structure

While there was limited data to explore this finding, we completed an analysis of all grade distributions throughout the 1,832 Massachusetts public and charter schools. Our result revealed that less than one percent of all schools have the same or similar structure: three schools in the state have a grade 4-7 configuration (.16%) and four other schools in the state have a 4-8 configuration (.21%).

Other emergent themes

Three other themes were mentioned enough times during our focus groups that they should be mentioned. While these themes were not included in our initial conceptualization, we added them as the themes emerged. The most common theme in this category was a feeling that school and district-level communication with families needed reimagining. While families acknowledged regular electronic communication in emails and newsletters, participants felt that specific communication about their children was missing at the classroom level. The many means of communication (third-party apps and websites) made it hard for families to keep up with what was necessary. Secondly, many participants brought up inconsistencies in school and district leadership. They pointed to recent district, principal, and teacher turnovers. For many participants, this turnover has also led to HVRSD being a district without a clear mission or vision and losing a once-strong identity. Finally, they spoke about how many combined factors have led to a loss of identity for the district.

Communication

Several participants noted that they had experienced breakdowns in authentic communication between families and the teachers and administrators in HVRSD. One said:

I would additionally mention communication. I've had difficulties with the district... I know about PowerSchool... and I check those things on a fairly regular basis. But the amount of communication that I've gotten from my kid's teachers when they were here was incredibly limited... and I don't know how I can support my kids at home if I'm not hearing from anybody here (Parent 3, FG2).

Most agreed that the district and building administrators did a good job with newsletters:

We get superintendent's letters and weekly recaps. But that's not exactly what parents are needing. You know I don't want to recap. I want to know how I can help just my own kid, you know I want their work, not what everybody did in school that week (Parent 3, FG1).

Several participants noted that even when they voiced their concerns and decided to choose other schools, "I don't think anybody reached out to or us or talked to us when [student name] left... And just yeah" (Parent 2, FG2).

Participants also commented about an overreliance on electronic communication and a broad range of apps and devices that teachers use to communicate with families. A parent said, "So if you're not really savvy, if you're not getting every single bit of communication online and checking every single one of your child's Zillion school apps, you're missing out" (Parent 1, FG1).

Other parents talked about how hard it was to know what their child was doing in the classroom because most of the work was assigned and graded online. She said:

You're not getting any papers home because they're all graded online. I don't see what she is working on in class. I can see her grades on her test, but not her actual tests. Nothing

comes home. So in some ways I know they want to get them on technology, but it would be helpful for parents to get some more paper at home (Parent 3, FG1).

Another parent concurred:

This is something very small, but something that I guess annoys me is that there is not a lot of paper communication... Every single point is online, right? I never know what's going on even though I'm connected to like everything... I get the newsletters and I read them, and I can get on PowerSchool, and I can see my child's grades, but I don't know what she's *doing* in school.... So she doesn't understand what she's doing in math, and she doesn't get homework because they *never* get homework. Then I can't help her, and if nobody is helping her here, then I should be helping her at home... (Parent 2, FG1).

Another parent of an elementary student said,

And literally, we had that conversation with the assistant principal because my son just received a failing grade in his music class... But he received a failing grade, and I received no notification from anybody else prior to this [his report card]. So I've reached out to the teacher. She hasn't provided me anything to justify the failing grade. And now I've just talked to the assistant principal, and she agrees. You know. It's unacceptable... (Parent 1, FG2).

Another parent agreed, when summarizing her reasons for choosing another district she said, "it just feels like communication's poor at best in every capacity..." (Parent 2, FG2).

While all families agreed that grades were available via PowerSchool they pushed back by saying things like, "I just think about not just the academics, but everything that's going on day to day in the building. And there have been like a lot of concerning issues... that are never communicated" (Parent 4, FG2). Parent 2, in FG2 used an anecdote from the elementary school

to drive home her point around day-to-day operations that were poorly communicated to parents. She said she wanted to be informed more about what happens “in their day- to- day, what’s going on.” She provided this example:

..like even right now the new playground rules.... Students aren’t allowed to go on to the playground at once anymore. They are broken up into different groups on the playground to be watched and supervised, so some can be on the playground one day, some kids have to be on the grass one day, some kids on the black top... None of this was sent home and explained to parents and If I didn't have friends that work in the school, I would not even know this... and the fact that he can't be on the playground every recess... that’s insane to me (Parent2, FG1).

Finally, another parent noted that at two specific times they were invited into the schools to provide feedback. She said, “at the elementary school the principals offered a couple coffee sessions in the morning and I'm the only parent that shows up” (Parent 4, FG2). She was ultimately upset that she “didn’t feel heard” and that her suggestions were never taken seriously. She also mentioned being part of a Parent Advisory Committee that “met once before COVID and that was it.”

Leadership Consistency and Turnover

Another theme that emerged from the focus groups was a concern for the lack of consistency in leadership at the district level. Many participants referenced times in the district’s history when a small number of leaders led the district and felt that this consistency was a major factor in the past success of the school system. One parent said:

I think a lack of consistency of teaching staff and administration is a big problem. I think that it's exacerbating a lot of these other issues. And I think that they need to focus on retaining quality administrators and quality teachers (Parent 5, FG 2).

When the facilitator asked, "Can you maybe put a finger on when that happened?" referencing the district's decline, he said, "I know exactly when it happened. It happened in 2012 when Al Skrocki retired as a superintendent" (Parent 5, FG2).

Another participant concurred saying, "I think there's been a lot of administration turnover in this district leadership. How many superintendents have been here in the last 10 years? Four? Five?" (Parent 4, FG2). Parent 3, FG 2 said, "I think the turnover is the problem right? You can't get your feet underneath you if you keep flipping. There wasn't enough time, I think, for a lot of these people...". The conversation continued, highlighting the main point:

Because I mean, you had Kristen Gordon, who was here for what? A year and a half? Vosburgh, he was here for a year. Rob Putnam was here interim for a while. You know, and I mean Aaron Dean has been the longest-served superintendent since Al Skrocki... (Parent 2, FG2).

In response, Parent 3, FG2 generalized the problem beyond the central office and said he thought the same thing went for high school principals, "I think you had that issue, too, for a while with the principals here in the high School... I mean, we do all step down at some point but after he stepped down to vice principal (long serving high school principal), then they had a string of principals here at the high school that didn't stay for very long" (Parent 5, FG2). An elementary parent echoed the sentiment:

You know at the elementary school we had Colvin and then we had Sawyer. Okay, she lasted until mid-year. And then we had Peter and now we have Erin, and now, she's out

on maternity leave.... And then last year what they did to the teachers is, they reconfigured, and they basically said you're teaching this grade and that's it.... And then, if they didn't like it, they said that's why we're letting you know now so that that you find another job... (Parent 2, FG2).

It was the feeling in the group that many teachers did in fact find other jobs, and a feeling that teacher turnover was also at a high level.

Superintendent, Principal, and Teacher Retention Rates Compared to State

Quantitative data included examining the district's historical (2013-2023) retention rates and comparing them to state averages. Figure 7 shows that while state retention rates at the superintendent level are roughly steady across the state at around 85%, meaning on average only 15% of districts in the state change superintendents each year,

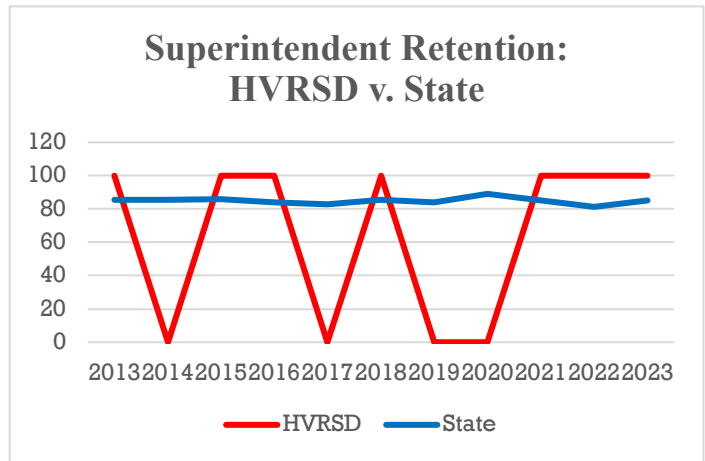


Figure 6: Superintendent Retention, HVRSD v State
Source: DESE, District Report Card

HVRSD had a tumultuous decade that saw the hiring and exit of four superintendents (Figure 6).

An analysis of principal retention (see Figure 7) shows similarly that there has been a steady turnover of building leadership during the same period. The elementary principal changed five times between 2013-2023, the middle school twice; and the high school four times.

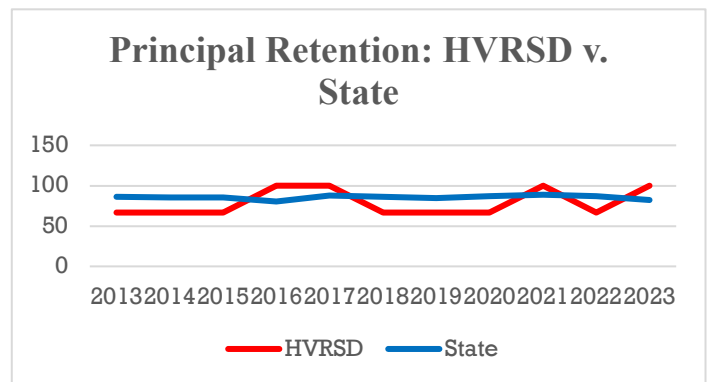


Figure 7: Principal Retention, HVRSD v State
Source: DESE, District Report Card

Teacher retention has been the steadiest over time, aligning with state averages from 2013-2017. However, since 2018 there has been a steady downward trend, with a precipitous decline in 2023 when there was a turnover of 22% of the teaching staff.

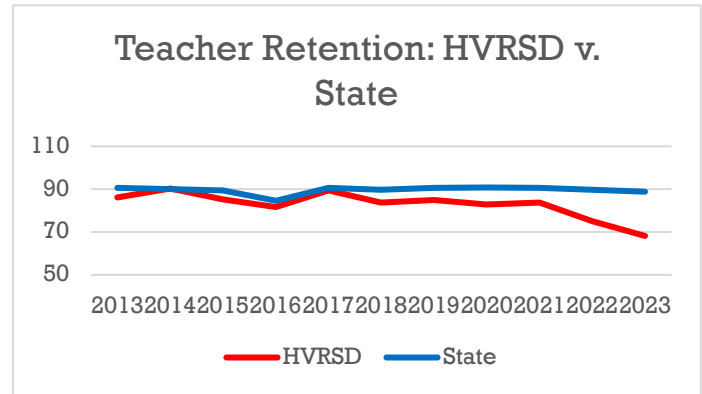


Figure 8: Teacher Retention, HVRSD v State
Source: DESE, District Report Card

Loss of Identity

The final major theme from the focus groups was the community’s perception that HVRSD has lost its identity. One participant noted that in the past, there was a strong connection between the mission statement written on the library wall and the lived experience of Hoosac Valley students. He said the mission was “something that high school kids could get behind” (Parent 3, FG2). He was able to quote from memory:

Yeah, I feel like the original mission statement. What was it? To strive for academic excellence in a climate of mutual respect... They've come so far away from that, even though it's still printed on all the books... They’ve come so far away from that mutual respect and I'm not just talking about teachers and students... like I'm also talking about teacher to teacher... they’re not communicating with each other (Parent 3, FG2).

Another participant took this one step further and noted that in the past, the school district was a place that attracted students from surrounding communities. She said, “in the past the teachers that worked here that did not live in Adams or Cheshire that taught here. If they were from out of district, they would send their kids to this school” (Parent 4, FG2). Now, conversely, one participant lamented,

What's interesting is seeing a lot of the staff and administration of this district not sending their kids to it, too. So it's like, well, it's not good enough for you when you work here. What does that say to everyone else? (Parent 2, FG2).

Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

As of 2021, 12.1% of eligible students chose to leave HVRSD through school choice. In total, 33% of school-age children residing in Adams and Cheshire are enrolled in either charter, private, vocational, homeschool, or public options other than HVRSD. This study's findings suggest that high school choice numbers are closely related to factors driving families out of the school district. The findings derived from the qualitative analysis of our focus groups and the descriptive quantitative analysis of available data have helped us answer two of our research questions. First, we discuss and interpret the findings as related to our primary research question: what push factors within HVRSD are causing parents and students to initiate school choice? Second, we answer the second research question by discussing the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic factors of the students and families choosing to stay in HVRSD and suggest how school choice may be affecting the make-up of the current student body. Unfortunately, we could not answer our third research question. There was not an accurate, systematic method for collecting the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic the students who left the district through school choice.

What are the push factors leading to school choice from HVRSD?

Several push factors were revealed through our qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts and quantitative examination of DESE's HVRSD District Report Cards, including student assessment data, demographic enrollment information, and fiscal indicators. First, four thematic push factors emerged from the study, which were supported by conceptual framework.

These include: perceptions of disorder as related to discipline and behavior concerns, low levels of resources, low academic achievement, and deteriorating facilities and awkward school structures. These prevalent themes were consistent across both qualitative and quantitative analyses and were supported by our literature review. A second group of themes, not specifically identified in the literature, also emerged from our focus groups: poorly designed district-wide communication and leadership turnover.

During the focus groups, families spoke openly and honestly about their perception disorder in HVRSD. Our focus groups revealed considerable concerns for student safety at the elementary and middle school levels. Parents told anecdotal stories of chaotic classrooms, a disproportionate number of students with behavior challenges, and teachers who lacked the management skills to ensure that classrooms were safe. Overall, these feelings of disorder, chaos, rising discipline disruptions, and declining student behavior align with our limited quantitative data analysis.

Only two district-reported data points could be analyzed to determine the reality of disorder in HVRSD schools, and both numbers were related to consequences of discipline infractions: the percentage of students suspended in and out-of-school. In both areas, the students' suspension percentages suspended were consistently slightly above state averages. District leadership prioritized safe learning environments in their 2022-23 District Improvement Plan. Strategic Objective 2 reads, "Staff will maintain a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for all students by regularly utilizing and reflecting on SEL data to ensure student's needs are being met" (DIP, 2022). One action step linked to discipline data includes school leadership teams "working together to align handbook policies and procedures to ensure clarity and consistency with expectations, supports, and information being provided to students and

families (DIP, p. 6). However, it is unclear if progress has been made toward this action step. Still, many families expressed rising concerns about their students' lower academic achievement and increased mental health concerns based on the impact of other students' behavior challenges.

It is important to note that several parents named unchecked bullying incidents as the final or driving factor in choosing another district. While bullying incidents are a state-reported statistic, there was only one finding of bullying over the last five years in all three HVRSD schools. This raises a question: is this low number due to a lack of consistent reporting by the district, a lack of following through with completing state-mandated bullying investigations, or were there indeed no findings of bullying within the three schools over time? The state reporting system has been updated to include "allegations of bullying," so this more detailed reporting will give the public a clearer picture.

Another concern raised by the parents in our focus groups was the low levels of resources available to the district when compared to surrounding districts. When talking with Superintendent Dean, it became clear that budgetary concerns have been plaguing the district for at least the last decade. As with other rural districts, school enrollment related to population decline is dropping even without school choice taking a toll. Because enrollment is the leading factor that determines foundational budgets, as enrollment goes down so does the amount of money available to the district. Yet, the district continues to bear the burden of increasing per pupil costs. According to an interview with Superintendent Dean, the district is consistently trying to provide more services and supports with minimal increases to the operational budget. Parents frankly stated that they didn't think the district had enough money available to make the changes they needed to make. They pointed to staffing concerns, increasing teacher turnover,

lack of academic and nonacademic programming, and a decline in the quality and quantity of athletics, which had been a point of pride in the community for decades.

The quantitative analysis of two fiscal indicators supports the notion that HVRSD is poorly funded. By comparing HVRSD's total per pupil expenditures to state averages during the past five years that data was available, it was determined that HVRSD spent an average of \$2,009 less per student than the state average. Similarly, there is a gap between the HVRSD and the state average percent net spending above the foundational budget. Massachusetts sets a foundational budget based on a formula that includes student enrollment and then calculates the required contribution local municipalities must make based on income and property taxes. On average, districts across the state fund their schools at a rate of about 20% above their minimum foundational budgets. As can be expected, higher spending above the foundation is directly correlated with student achievement. Over the past five years, HVRSD averaged 15% below the state average. The perception that HVRSD is underfunded is a reality that makes school improvement even more of a challenge for the district.

According to an interview with Superintendent Dean, the district partnered with The Collins Center for Public Management in 2012 in reaction to troubling fiscal trends, and made several changes based on the study's recommendations. One meaningful change, the closing of Cheshire Elementary School, and the subsequent consolidation of students between the two remaining buildings led to an awkward school structure with fourth through seventh-grade middle school students housed within a separate space within the high school. This was a driving factor leading parents to choose other districts. Our focus groups revealed that parents of students are apprehensive about the middle and intermediate school-age school structure.

Interestingly, other public school districts, the local charter, parochial and vocational schools follow more traditional school structures.

Low academic achievement was mentioned by all participants as a reason for choosing other districts. Parents felt that some HVRSD classrooms lacked rigor, that grading practices were inconsistent and typically inflated, and that graded assignments often lacked the feedback necessary for students to improve or for parents to help their children succeed. Many participants noted that talking to friends and students who attended other schools gave them the impression that other districts had more rigorous classes that set their students up for success both in college and post-secondary careers.

The review of state assessment scores revealed alarming gaps between HVRSD and the state. On average, between 2018-2022, when compared to state averages, 16% fewer students in grades 3-8 scored proficient or higher on the ELA MCAS test. In mathematics, the gap was 23%. While Massachusetts did not assign accountability ratings in 2021 or 2022 because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, these scores would likely qualify the district for turnaround status in a typical year. The high school assessment data is better but still below state averages. Compared to state averages, 2% fewer HVRSD 10th graders are proficient or higher in ELA, with 7% fewer in Mathematics. Other indicators for the high school also support low academic achievement: fewer students tend to graduate on time (5.4% below the state average in 2022) from HVRSD, and more students drop out than the state average (3.5% above the state average in 2022); also, between 2018-2022 nearly 5% fewer students from HVRSD went to a 2- or 4-year college or university after graduation. All indicators point to needed improvement aimed at student achievement and improved outcomes after graduation. While the state does curate post-secondary employment data for districts, the database is incomplete, especially in recent years.

To get an accurate picture of how HVRSD graduates are faring in the job market, an internal survey of alumni would be necessary.

Several other factors mentioned by the focus group participants, although not explicitly mentioned in the literature review, were powerful drivers in the local context. First was the confusing nature of classroom-level and building-level communication. Many noted that the Superintendent's updates were helpful and consistent at the district level. However, building-level communication seemed less informative. Further, classroom teachers used various apps and platforms to communicate with families. When combined with PowerSchool, it could lead to an overwhelming barrage of information that made it hard to determine what was important and what was relevant for their individual students.

Another point about two-way communication mentioned was the lack of parent input into decision-making at the district level. One participant noted that she was involved with providing input into the district improvement plan during Superintendent Dean's first year. Still, the promise of further Parent Advisory Meetings never came to fruition, and they only met once. Similarly, at the building level, principals sometimes offered parent meetings, but they weren't well attended or publicized, and there was a perception that the feedback that was shared was never acted upon.

Many participants supported Superintendent Dean and were glad he had committed to leading the district for the long term. They pointed to frequent turnover at district and building leadership levels as detrimental to stability. Some posited leadership turnover was one of the driving factors behind what they perceived as high teacher turnover rates in recent years. When the qualitative data was analyzed, the analysis revealed that retention during the last decade at

HVRSD was tumultuous. The district had above-average turnover at the superintendent, principal, and teacher levels.

What are the characteristics of the students and families choosing to leave or stay?

The high number of Adams and Cheshire students who do not enroll in HVRSD affects overall enrollment and the demographic and socioeconomic composition of the student body that remains. The literature is clear that school choice policy has the potential to further divide public schools into have and have-nots based on the propensity of parents who are higher income, white, and educated to enact their right to choose alternate schooling options for their children. Critics have warned that open enrollment policies can shift students to schools that are more homogenous, leaving lower-performing schools to become increasingly lower income and serve more students of color.

While the available data makes it difficult to determine the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of students leaving, we could use DESE’s District Profile to determine the characteristics of those students who stayed in the district. We then used census

data to compare the demographic makeup of both Adams and Cheshire with the demographics of HVRSD. The results raise concerns that can be used as a discussion point.

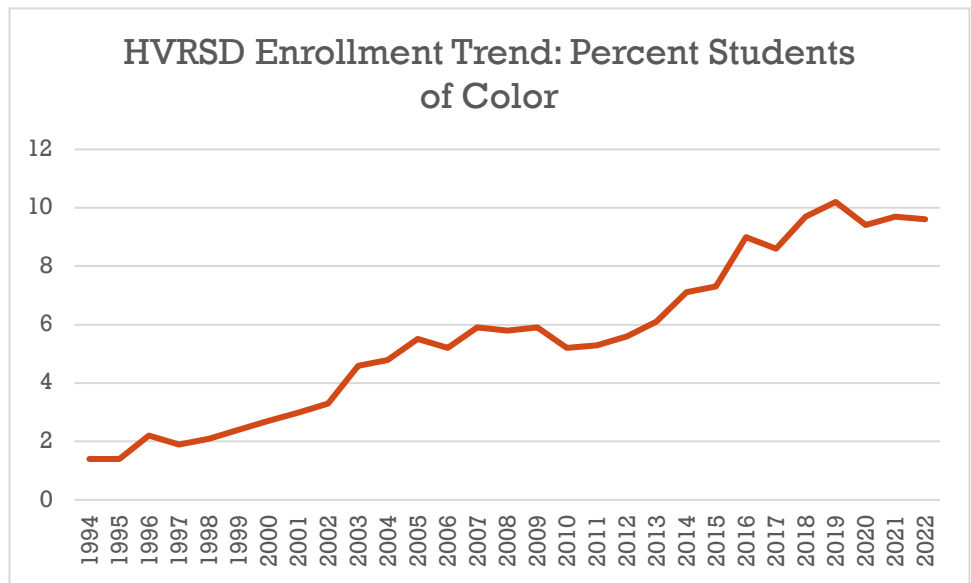


Figure 9: HVRSD Enrollment Trend: % Students of Color
Source: Massachusetts DESE, School and District Profiles (1994-2022)

Students of color are overrepresented in the HVRSD community when compared to the community as a whole. According to the 2020 US Census, .08% of the Adams and Cheshire community is African American, while 3% of

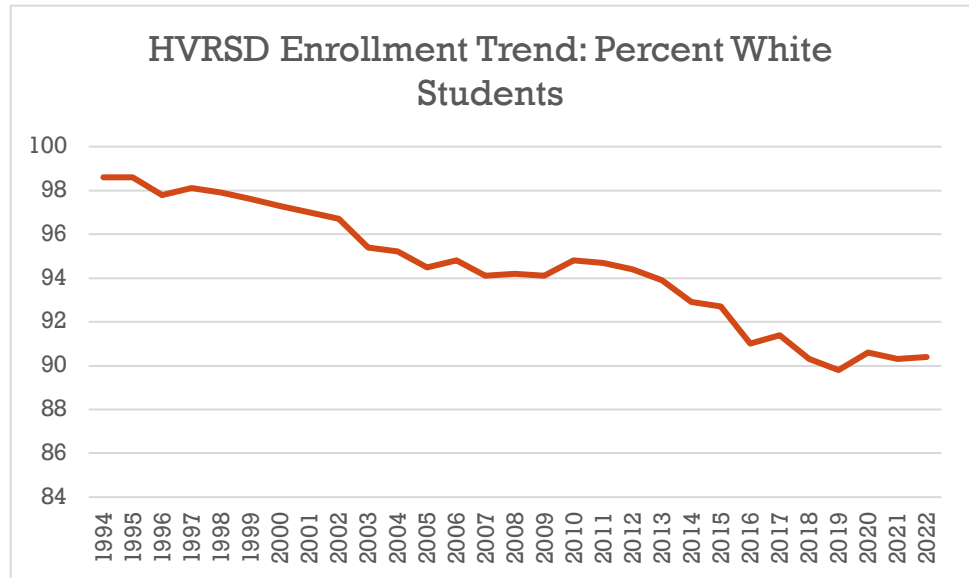


Figure 10: HVRSD Enrollment Trend: % White
 Source: Massachusetts DESE, School and District Profiles (1994-2022)

HVRSD students are African American. Similarly, census data shows that 2.4% of the Adams-Cheshire community is Hispanic, compared to 5% of HVRSD students; 3.1% of HVRSD students are Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic, compared to 2.8% of the Adams-Cheshire community. Finally, 89% of HVRSD students are White, compared to 94.3% of the Adams-Cheshire community. While this growing diversity is not alarming when viewed alone, it becomes a point of concern when placed in the context of school choice and viewed in comparison with the census data, which is diversifying at a slower rate.

Another similar statistic is that low-income students are overrepresented in HVRSD when compared to the Adams-Cheshire community. The DESE District Profile shows that 70% of HVRSD students qualify for free and reduced lunch, when compared to 13% of Adams-Cheshire residents living below the poverty line. However, it must be cautioned that the only indicator we have at the school level to determine poverty is the number of free and reduced lunch recipients. At the same time, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line

is reported to the community at large and not all students who receive free or reduced lunch are living below the poverty line. These statistics are calculated differently and cannot necessarily be used comparatively to derive a valid argument. This study is not asserting that school choice is causing or is even correlated to the changing demographics of the district. However, based on our review of the literature, this comparison raises concerns that school choice could be disproportionately outsourcing upper- and middle-income, white, students to other districts. This leaves district leaders with an opportunity to further explore the demographic outcomes of their improvement planning.

Recommendations

Summary of Recommendations

The findings above present HVRSD with opportunities to address community perceptions that directly influence the school enrollment choices of Adams and Cheshire families. The evidence-based recommendations presented below directly address the same perceptions and concerns of families choosing to have their children educated in other school districts. The following section introduces seven evidence-based recommendations and then elaborates on how implementation could retain more families within the district and reverse declining enrollment trends.

We make two recommendations that directly address the perception of disorder within HVRSD schools and classrooms: update the district’s outdated code of conduct and support teachers and families with strategic responses to behavioral concerns. The second group of recommendations builds off work already being pursued at the district level. It addresses the perception that HVRSD cannot offer high-quality academic and nonacademic programming because of low fiscal resources. These include exploring shared service agreements with

surrounding districts, municipalities, and colleges to increase access to desired programming. We recommend continuing existing PLCs (high-impact FAR teams) to increase academic rigor and improve instructional practices. Also, we believe continuing the recent focus on pursuing DESE “pathways” provides students with clear academic and career outcomes. Finally, developing a well-defined communication plan that is strategic and responsive to the information families feel is most pertinent to their children’s education.

A last group of recommendations addresses the concerns that the district’s facilities are aging, needing repair, and necessitating nontraditional age groupings at elementary and middle school. These recommendations include creating a partnership with the Massachusetts School Building Association to complete an assessment of current school facilities and establishing an ad hoc committee to explore restructuring HVRSD schools into more traditional grade distributions.

Recommendation 1: Establish an ad hoc stakeholder committee to update the HVRSD Code of Conduct

Establish an ad hoc stakeholder committee to create an updated Code of Conduct that incorporates stakeholder feedback and supports the district’s vision to maintain safe and inclusive learning environments by establishing and communicating clear behavioral expectations and the consequences, supports, and interventions that build accountability.

Generally, one of the most crucial factors when evaluating schools is the perception of school safety (Smerkar, 2009). In a review of behavior policies in schools, the American Psychological Association (2008) stated:

There can be no doubt that schools have a duty to use all effective means needed to maintain a safe and disciplined learning environment. Beyond the simple responsibility to keep children safe, teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn in a climate marked by chaos and disruption. About this there is no controversy (p. 862).

According to Lieber et al. (2015), a code of conduct is a “critical resource that has the potential to bring stakeholders together to collaboratively align their efforts in support of every student in the district and the school” (75). Codes of conduct can influence the district’s overall climate, primarily when the code proactively defines acceptable behaviors later taught and modeled for all students (West, et al., 2007). A report from the American Federation of Teachers (2003) further builds upon the argument that codes of conduct can lead to safer schools and appropriate learning environments. They argue that they are effective management tools that set the standard for appropriate behaviors within the learning environment.

The School Superintendents Association (AASA) has developed a framework for creating or revising school districts’ codes of conduct to ensure that safe, healthy school climates are created and sustained. The evidence-based framework involves moving away from a reliance on exclusionary disciplinary practices, introducing clear behavioral expectations that are promoted systematically, supporting students in meeting those expectations through a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) that includes appropriate supports and interventions for students, and includes both restorative and accountable consequences that address behavioral infractions and other violations of the code of conduct (2014).

Importantly, Noonan, Tunney et al. (1999) suggest that the documents are best developed with input from the school and community, specifically, the school staff and parents. West, Leon-Guerrero, and Stevens (2007) further explain that behavior codes are only successful when there is acceptance by the entire school community. Therefore, it is important that revising or rewriting a Code of Conduct should be an act of the entire community.

Therefore, we recommend that the district creates an ad hoc committee composed of relevant stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, staff, students, parents, coaches, and

community partners. Using the AASA framework, the committee can outline student, parent, and staff rights and responsibilities, identify expectations that can be promoted, clarify preventative measures, and align consequences with interventions. Further, a plan that involves communicating the code to families, teaching expectations and consequences to students, and supporting teachers and administrators in enforcing the code can be created and shared.

Recommendation 2: Provide professional learning focused on responding to behavior concerns

Provide professional learning opportunities to all staff that are centered on responding to behavior concerns through a behavior management framework that helps avoid chaos in the classroom.

A nationwide survey released in February 2023 found that 84 percent of teachers believe their students are “developmentally behind in self-regulation and relationship building compared to students prior to the pandemic” and that violent classroom incidents have more than doubled since COVID (EAB, 2023, p. 1). Further, recent research has established:

disruption in routines continues to reverberate in our classrooms, perhaps most of all in social skills and behavior. The result is a sometimes-scary work environment for teachers and school staff, complicated by the fact that many do not feel supported in a crisis by either school administrators or parents (Allen, 2023).

The Educational Advisory Board (EAB) (2023) reports, “student behavior is a key underlying driver of low morale” (p.4). It is critical for district leaders to provide teachers with the tools to support students’ behavioral, mental, and social-emotional health, especially through effective responses to behavioral concerns.

One of the major barriers to improving behavior management is the need for adequate training on implementing behavior management techniques. Therefore, to support teachers in creating safe instructional spaces and assuage families’ anxieties that unmanaged behavioral

concerns are affecting their students' social, emotional, and academic success, the district should design or seek out professional development that explicitly introduces teachers to classroom management strategies that are explicit and part of a behavior management system that is clear and consistent across schools and classrooms.

EAB research on student behavior reports that while many school districts have best-practice behavior management programs, school administrators must support implementing these programs for them to be effective (2023). HVRSD school leaders must support teachers in effectively managing student behavior by systematizing behavior management that is explicit about what strategies to use and when to use them. Building an effective behavior management framework for the district should start with district leadership defining this as a priority. Next, identify the shortcomings in their existing behavior management processes, and elicit teacher-approved solutions. Once the agreed-upon behavioral management framework is created and codified in the updated code of conduct, it can be leveraged to create the conditions for positive student behavior and develop an ongoing system of support and professional development training.

HVRSD needs to engage its educators continuously and offer opportunities based on their capacity and comfort level with implementation. Dedicating time to train teachers to appropriately respond to behavior concerns will signal that teacher and parent concerns have been heard and are a priority. Finally, by clearly and consistently communicating the district's goals and expectations for behavior with families and community stakeholders, HVRSD will empower all stakeholders in engaging in the process for reinforcing a district-wide behavior management framework.

Recommendation 3: Engage in shared service agreements with surrounding organizations

Continue exploring shared service agreements with surrounding districts, municipalities, and colleges to increase access to the desired programming.

According to Norris-Tirrel, et al. (2010) strategic collaboration is an “intentional, collective approach to addressing problems,” and local governments can use “authentic and inclusive economic development decision-making processes to plan and implement smart growth to assure a sustainable future” (p.3). One component of this collaborative approach is building networks through shared service agreements, which allow public bodies to share limited resources. These agreements have become increasingly popular as a viable alternative that gives organizations access to valuable services while retaining their autonomy (Norris-Tireel, 2010).

Further, a recent study completed by the Commission on the Fiscal Health of Rural School Districts (2022) deemed shared service agreements an attractive option for rural school districts. They found that shared service agreements can create efficiency by leveraging available expertise in areas with low numbers of licensed or experienced professionals (Blais & Hinds, 2022). These agreements are beneficial in situations in which schools need additional resources, but “regionalization is not desired by local communities or is not practical for other reasons” (Blais & Hinds, 2022, p.34). While combining with surrounding districts through a new regional agreement is currently not attractive, sharing services with other districts is reasonable and responsible.

Recently, HVRSD has entered into two shared services agreements with North Adams Public Schools to share two key positions that they were unable to finance or sustain on their own: athletic director and director of buildings and grounds. While the cost savings associated with shared service agreements will likely not be substantial and these two positions will not resolve the fiscal challenges presented by the HVRSD operating budget in a sustainable way, they do promise to add or expand services.

Therefore, we recommend exploring similar shared service agreements in areas where they have been successful in other districts, such as combatting chronic absenteeism, providing needed mental health services, managing food services and in providing special education testing and services. In the future the school district may want to explore creating an educational collaborative (there are currently 26 in the state, serving 270 school districts) that can provide specialized special education services, vocational programming, coordinated purchasing to increase purchasing power in areas of transportation costs, shared curriculum, and assessments (Blais & Hinds, 2022). Another area where shared agreements may prove to be beneficial for HVRSD is joining other districts in offering in-person or online advanced placement and early college classes.

Recommendation 4: Leverage existing PLCs to improve quality of instruction

District administrators should leverage their successful implementation of Professional Learning Communities with a focus on implementation of high leverage teaching practices.

Research supports the idea that HVRSD can increase student achievement through the ongoing implementation of PLCs within their district. Sims et al. (2015) asserted that schools across the United States are implementing Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to improve instructional practices and raise student achievement. PLCs are teams of teachers that meet regularly to collaborate toward continued improvement (Reichstetter, 2006). Common goals of PLCs include building capacity for change, shifting instructional practices, and using data to support struggling students (Sims et al., 2015). Research shows that students who are taught using in high-impact practices (HIPs) employ higher levels of learning success. These evidenced-based practices are most impactful when shared among others involved in school-level PLCs. According to the International Society for Technology in Education, PLCs allow teachers to “share best practices and brainstorm innovative ways to improve learning and drive

student achievement” (Serviss, 2023, p.1). The ISTE also points out these teams stay on top of new research, technology, and other relevant tools that enhance academic performance of all students (Serviss, 2023). Using PLCs, teachers learn from each other, reflect on their practices, and focus on learning and creating products “with the result of answering questions that lead to student achievement” (Servisse, 2023, p. 3).

Through their District Improvement Plan, HVRSD has made the implementation of “high-impact teams” a multi-year priority and has committed to “training and implementation of high leverage teaching practices.” These PLCs are formulated around a specific protocol based on a Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle that aims to increase student outcomes through the intentional and purposeful use of data-driven practices and assessment. Prioritizing this work will empower and encourage teachers to analyze student performance data to identify curricular gaps, develop common formative assessments and pedagogical strategies, and lead to increased performance and achievement of students.

The Education Advisor Board (EAB) further recommends that rather than overwhelming teachers with massive amounts of change, districts should have a strategic focus on specific pedagogical strategies or curriculum changes that becomes the work of PLCs. HVRSD should select one area of focus for the entire district, develop a multi-year PLC implementation plan to ensure teacher mastery of the concepts, and continually assess PLC effectiveness by analyzing district and building level student and teacher achievement data. While the 2022-23 District Improvement Plan lists implementation of “high leverage instructional practices” as a strategic objective, it is unclear which practices are included in the district-wide focus. Strategies and instructional protocols should be purposefully targeted and made explicit so that change is not overwhelming for teachers and staff.

Recommendation 5: Continue creating academic and career pathways for students

Continue the pursuit of DESE approved “Pathways” that will create clear options for specific academic and career outcomes. Especially consider providing programing not currently available at other area schools.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (2014) acknowledges that “most school systems are working toward the goal of getting their students “college-and career-ready,” but what we mean by “career-ready” is not always clear, and the supply of quality career-technical education programs has not kept pace with demand (p.2). In response to that demand, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education currently supports an initiative establishing High Quality College and Career Pathways (HQCCPs) that provides districts with guidance and grant funding to expand student access to college and career pathways.

DESEs pathways fall into two categories: early college and innovative career pathways (DESE, 2017). According to the American Institute for Research, “students who attended early college were 5% more likely to graduate high school, 10% more likely to be enrolled in college withing two years of their high school graduation, and 22% more likely to obtain an associates’ degree of higher” (AIR, 2014). Based on outcomes in other states, Massachusetts anticipates that by establishing clear HQCCP schools have the potential to “increase high school graduation rates, college going rates, persistence in higher education, and completion of associate’s and bachelor’s degrees” (DESE, 2023).

HVRSD has recently pursued becoming a designated Innovation Pathways district. By following the guidelines outlined by DESE Innovative Pathways Designation Criteria (2020) the district will provide participating students “supportive, rigorous academic experiences and career development education relevant to their next steps after high school” (p.2). Therefore, we recommend that HVRSD continue to work collaboratively with DESE to provide students access

to a pathway that has been created based on students’ preferences and that also has strong links to the future employment needs in Berkshire County. The hope is that the pathways will help provide graduates with well-designed post-secondary plans that are linked to Massachusetts’ workforce opportunities (Innovation Pathways, 2020). A component of this work that is essential to reducing school choice numbers is creating programming that local vocational and charter schools lack. Two “pathways” that have already been created at HVHS are biotechnology and environmental science. Because these pathways are unique in the region, they should be promoted and publicized with an aggressive marketing campaign so that families making school-choice decisions know that they are available for HVRSD students.

In the future, expanding beyond the initial Innovation Pathways and incorporating other Early College pathways into HVRSD programming will be important in ensuring that the district is providing students with supportive, rigorous academic experiences. Again, a similar partnership with DESE would ensure that the fiscal and operational resources are available to develop academic pathways that could raise academic expectations while also matching student needs to a rigorous progression of academic programming.

Recommendation 6: Assess school facilities and explore restructuring grade distributions

Partner with the Massachusetts School Building Association to complete an assessment of current school facilities in exploration of restructuring HVRSD schools into more traditional grade distributions.

In 2012, the Adams-Cheshire Regional School District partnered with the Edward J Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management to explore cost-saving alternatives for the district to reduce costs and help manage the increasing gap between year-over-year operating costs and available revenue. At the time, enrollment was already trending downward. The district was

concerned that HVMHS had been renovated in 2012 for a projected enrollment of 805 students in grades 6-12, however, the school was only serving 624 students (MSBA, 2017).

One of the significant outcomes of the study was the report's recommendation to close Cheshire Elementary School, consolidate the districts' PK-3 in CT Plunkett Elementary (now HVES), and move the district's 4th and 5th graders to middle and high school. This move has remained an unpopular decision and a driving factor in school choice. The remaining school, Hoosac Valley Elementary School, still requires significant capital investment to ensure that it remains a safe, healthy environment and that its classrooms and facilities are outfitted to keep up with the demands of 21st century learning.

Therefore, we recommend that the HVRSD form a Feasibility Study Committee, which is required in order to seek funding through the Massachusetts School Building Association (MSBA, 2023). It will be important that the district engages in a transparent and public process that includes a full range of stakeholders, so that community members from both towns feel that they have had an opportunity to provide input and publicize their concerns. This group should engage in the exploration of several alternatives and hire an expert to perform a physical assessment of the Hoosac Valley Elementary School, the Hoosac Valley Middle and High School, and their adjoining properties. Importantly, capital projects should be weighed that offer more traditional grade span alternatives that focus on meeting the academic, social emotional, college and career goals of our students in the most cost-effective manner possible.

Recommendation 7: Develop a district wide communication plan

Develop a well-defined communication plan that is strategic and responsive to the information families feel is most pertinent to their children's education.

District administrators need to listen to the needs of and work together with parents to cultivate partnerships to support student success. Effective parental engagement strategies

consistently involve parents' input and share decision-making power across the parent-district partnership. In a 2019 report by the EAB:

public school districts across the U.S. increasingly need a strategy to better communicate with their stakeholders, including staff, teachers, parents, students, and the wider community. The new reality of constant social media interactions, the rapid spread of information regardless of accuracy, and growing skepticism of public schools are forcing districts to develop both a detailed communications strategy... (EAB, 2019, p.1).

Cultivating meaningful family engagement begins by moving away from deficit-focused communications towards increased strengths-based, proactive interactions. Families want to hear from educators to help support their children in positive ways. The Department of Education (2013) offered a framework that creates strong partnerships between families and administrators as it is often difficult "to facilitate and support parent-district partnerships to promote student success" (USDE, 2013, p. 3). This framework builds on existing research that suggests partnerships between home and school can only develop and thrive if families and staff have the collective capacity to engage in a partnership.

Therefore, we suggest that HVRSD uses the framework to create a district-wide communication plan that builds and strengthens supportive partnerships with their families. It should explore adopting the following components: First, disseminate a family survey aimed at identifying preferred media and communication methods. Several families mentioned an over-reliance on electronic communication being a significant barrier. Secondly, implement a monthly Parent Advisory Committee to gather feedback and review improvement plans with families. An initial attempt at installing a PAC was seen as positive sign when it was convened in 2019. Update websites and maintain a strong social media presence that is easily understood,

accessible, and creates a positive narrative that promotes district successes. Finally, use the family survey data to limit the number of messaging apps used across the district. Encourage building-leaders and teachers to use the preferred modes of communication to consistently engage in two-way communication with families.

By creating a communication plan that engages all invested stakeholders, HVRSD will build trust, foster transparency, and collaborate towards continuous improvement for the success of all students and families.

Limitations

This improvement project was created using a mixed-methods, exploratory sequential design. As such, claiming any causal or generalizable relationships between variables is difficult. Our findings and recommendations were determined after careful analysis that was guided by our conceptual framework, which ultimately has its own limitations.

One of the limitations of our conceptual framework, which directly impacted our questions design and the composition of our focus groups, is that it relied on the assumption that parents, not children, were the school choice decision-makers. However, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that as students get older, their agency in school choice grows (Corcoran & Jennings, 2019). Our study did not directly consider the input of older students who may have pushed for their own school choice. However, many parents of middle and high school students, and some elementary parents, did speak to their children's preferences being heavily weighted in the decision-making process.

Another limitation is that we could not answer accurately the second question posed at the outset of our research. We asked, "What are the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the students and families choosing to leave?" Yet, we lacked

the data needed to fully explore the questions. An established system of clear, systematic data collection and record keeping would have to be established to answer this question over time. Perhaps, a future consideration would be for DESE to collect disaggregated school-based demographic and academic on school choice students. This would go a long way to exploring the demographic, socioeconomic, and academic impact school choice is having on Massachusetts schools. Until then, HVRSD could begin collecting and monitoring data that could answer our original question. Coupling data collection with exit interviews of school choice families could help the district develop a dynamic sense of who is making the decisions to leave.

Through the course of our focus groups, it was reported that many HVRSD staff, who are Adams and Cheshire residents, choose to send their children out-of-district through school choice. As we explored this phenomenon, we attempted to create a focus group of teachers and staff. However, teachers and staff in the school were generally not comfortable discussing their concerns in a group setting. While several communicated that they would talk “off the record” or in individual interviews, time constraints did not allow us to follow through. Therefore, an important perspective was missing from the data. A future consideration for the district could be to create a safe space for conversations to take place where this important perspective is heard and understood. Teachers who live in the community can be a district’s strongest ambassadors, so understanding why so many are sending their children elsewhere is important and could be beneficial for sustained school improvement.

Conclusion

School choice is a complex policy issue that impacts all parts of the federal, state, and local educational systems. It brings into play politics, fiscal policy, demographics, and economics and raises questions about its impact on equitable outcomes for students. HVRSD is a

school system that is affected by the fiscal and demographic pull of school choice. However, we are confident that the current leadership can create a sustainable plan that both improves the school system and makes it more attractive for school choice candidates.

This study sought to answer three questions: What push factors within HVRSD are causing students/families to initiate school choice? What are the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the students and families choosing to leave? What are the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of students and families choosing to stay? By conducting and analyzing focus group interviews and completing descriptive quantitative analysis of available data points, we were able to answer the first question and identify five salient push factors leading Adams and Cheshire residents to seek alternate schools and districts for their students' education. We were also able to craft seven evidence-based solutions that directly address the findings.

We could not answer the second question because of a lack of usable data. We still do not know for sure the demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics of the students and families choosing to leave. However, we were able to determine that the students who stay in the district are more diverse and lower income than the larger community. The possibility that school choice is contributing to an inequitable divide in the community makes it important to continue exploring these issues so that the district can take action to reverse the downward trend.

Jabbar (2015) states that school leaders have power in how they react to their school's position in the school choice marketplace. He suggests that school leaders must respond by finding their niche and exploiting the value they add to their community. HVRSD will have to be ready to allocate resources that expand their academic and extracurricular programming, and market their schools as safe and welcoming environments that set high standards and produce

positive student outcomes. Undoubtedly, some form of restructuring will be required, and this will be a political and fiscal lift for the leadership team and the community. The strategies we recommended are meant to work together effectively to reposition HVRSD at the forefront of the school choice marketplace and create district-level outcomes that attract more students, improve academic performance, and increase family engagement.

Appendix I: Letter to Focus Group Participants

VANDERBILT  UNIVERSITY

HVRSD School Choice Families:

As part of our doctoral studies at Vanderbilt University, we are working with Hoosac Valley Regional School District on an improvement project exploring how to sustain and increase current enrollment. As part of our data collection we will be facilitating multiple focus groups that consist of school choice families who have chosen or are considering options other than HVRSD for at least some portion of their child's education. Thank you for considering taking part in this process.

During our time together, we will be discussing the push and pull factors that have led to your decision to choice out of or into HVRSD. Simply put, we are trying to determine what you like and don't like about HVRSD so that we can propose evidence-based solutions that might be implemented in the future.

The session will be facilitated by doctoral candidates Kelly Linkenhoker, who will be joining our group via zoom and Michael Henault, who will be on site but will not participate in the question and answer process. For those participants joining our session via zoom, here is the link:

<https://zoom.us/j/96676619058>

We will be recording the session because we want to make sure that we are able to accurately collect your comments. People often say helpful things in these discussions, and we can't write fast enough to get them all down. We will be on a first-name basis tonight, but we won't use any names in our reports. Our conversations will be transcribed using an artificial intelligence transcription program, which will identify each participant by a number. You may be assured of confidentiality regarding our study. We will not link any comment directly with individuals and will be using our data to look for overall trends in your decision-making. We ask that in order for this to be a safe space, any comments shared in the discussion are kept within this focus group.

Upon completion, we will share our study and findings, including our recommendations for the district with the administrative team at HVRSD. If you provide your email address, we will gladly share the completed study with each of you.

Respectfully,

Michael Henault
Kelly Linkenhoker
Doctoral Candidates
Vanderbilt University

Appendix II: Frequency counts of coded themes

Table 14: Frequency Count for Focus Group 1

<i>Qualitative Codes from Conceptual Framework</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Qualitative Codes that Emerged from Focus Groups</i>	<i>n</i>
1.Perceptions of disorder	23	8.Special Education	3
2.Overcrowding	0	9.Leadership Consistency	4
3.Levels of resources	11	10.Identity	3
4.Academic achievement	10	11.Communication	7
5.School location and geography	5		
6.Social capital (peers, demographics, and diversity)	7		
7.Facilities / School structures	7		

Table 15: Frequency Count for Focus Group 2

<i>Qualitative Codes from Conceptual Framework</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Qualitative Codes that Emerged from Focus Groups</i>	<i>n</i>
1.Perceptions of disorder	26	8.Special Education	0
2.Overcrowding	0	9.Leadership Consistency	6
3.Levels of resources	16	10.Identity	3
4.Academic achievement	11	11.Communication	10
5.School location and geography	1		
6.Social capital (peers, demographics, and diversity)	4		
7.Facilities/School Structure	6		

Table 16: Frequency Count Totals

<i>Qualitative Codes from Conceptual Framework (Aloe, 2018; Smerkar, 2009)</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Qualitative Codes that Emerged from Focus Groups</i>	<i>n</i>
1.Perceptions of disorder	47	8.Special Education	0
2.Overcrowding	0	9.Leadership Consistency	1
3.Levels of resources	29	10.Identity	6
4.Academic achievement	21	11.Communication	16
5.School location and geography	6		
6.Social capital (peers, demographics, and diversity)	15		
7.Facilities/School Structure	16		

Appendix III: Representative quotations of each coded theme

<p>1. <i>Perceptions of disorder</i></p>	<p>And you know, just there are a lot of behavioral issues that he had never really encountered before. [group chatter “there are a lot of behavioral issues going on...”] which took away from his experiences (Parent 2a, FG1).</p>
<p>2. <i>Levels of resources</i></p>	<p>I hate to say this because I don't know what to be done, but it really comes down largely, I think, to money for this district. They just don't have the resources to do the things that they need to do it... so more kids are leaving (Parent 4, FG1).</p>
<p>3. <i>Academic achievement</i></p>	<p>It's a college prep school, so the standards are higher and we made the switch (Parent 2, FG1).</p>
<p>4. <i>Social capital (peers, demographics, and diversity)</i></p>	<p>So I think I think that feeling of belonging, or that feeling that people know me. And if I wasn't here people would notice that I wasn't here that doesn't happen here... (Parent 3, FG2).</p>
<p>5. <i>School Structures and facilities</i></p>	<p>And even the way the school districts are structured in Berkshire County... If you lived in California, all of Berkshire County would be one school district, not 10 different ones that are all competing for resources (Parent 2, FG1).</p>
<p>6. <i>School location and geography</i></p>	<p>There just happens to be a charter school that is right here in town? Yeah. Okay. So that you know, there is that alternative which I think hurts the district... this district more than anything else, because it is right here in town, and just as easy as you would drop your kid off, and you could drop your kid off at BART. So they're literally right across the street from one of them (Parent 3, FG2).</p>
<p>7. <i>Communication</i></p>	<p>I would say that I also was in fairly consistent contact with the Deans and the principals in</p>

	<p>both buildings, and like. Because I had several concerns, and like I said, like you, I'm an educator. So when I think something is wrong I have real research to back up what I'm talking about. I'm not just making this stuff up. You know what I mean, so like you are it? And I felt as though my opinions and my suggestions were pushed aside (Parent 2, FG2).</p>
<p>8. <i>Identity</i></p>	<p>Yeah, right now. Yeah, I feel like the original mission statement. What was it, "to strive for academic excellence in a climate of mutual respect... They've come so far away from that, even though it's still printed on all the books, because I looked it up... They've come so far away from that mutual respect. I'm. I'm not just talking about teachers, students whatever like I'm also talking. I think, teacher-teacher like they, they're not communicating with each other. I just feel like it's a bigger it's a bigger kettle of fish. FG#2</p>
<p>9. <i>Leadership Consistency</i></p>	<p>[Parent # 5]: I think a lack of consistency and teaching staff administration is a big problem. I think that it's exacerbating a lot of these other issues. And I think that they tried to focus on retaining quality administrators and quality teachers instead of... (Parent 5, FG1).</p>

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