

Executive Summary

The overarching goal of this project was to provide the ConVal community with an answer to the question posed in the district's Request for Proposals (RFP), "**What is best for ConVal students and taxpayers?**" The RFP also specified these requirements:

- ◆ evaluate the consolidation of district schools
- ◆ consider educational, safety, financial, social, organizational control, community impacts
- ◆ provide neutrality
- ◆ offer community Involvement
- ◆ develop specific recommendations

Prismatic believes it has met all of these requirements in the accompanying report.

It is important to note that the ConVal School Board voluntarily undertook this work and that the question of reconfiguration has been discussed in the community for many years. It is also important to note that this project could not have been completed without the willingness of many community constituents, including ConVal staff, to provide data, time, and thoughts.

Considerations and Community Involvement

Project activities occurred from July through October 2023. Data analysis, the data party, and presentation of results occurred July through December 2023. Prismatic provided a team of 7 consultants and 5 analysts for this project.



In this project, Prismatic:

- ◆ collected extensive data from the district
- ◆ visited every ConVal school several times
- ◆ interviewed school board members and district staff
- ◆ completed focus groups with students and district staff
- ◆ administered surveys of students, parents, staff, and community members
- ◆ hosted a meeting in each town
- ◆ hosted an online forum
- ◆ spent a total of 60 days onsite



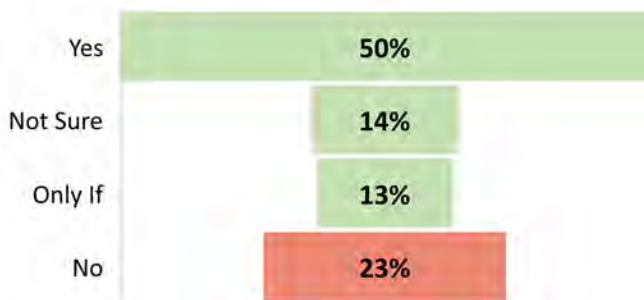
Based on its analysis of data, the consulting team developed a number of findings prior to developing its reconfiguration recommendation. The background information and community input used to develop them are summarized in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. Prismatic’s findings were:

- ◆ Within each ConVal town there is some support for changing the status quo. On the September community survey, a majority in 6 towns expressed support for looking at options for reducing the number of schools if ConVal enrollment continues to decline. A majority in 4 towns expressed support for considering the closure of elementary schools with less than 50 students. In only 1 town did a majority of residents indicate that ConVal should never close an elementary school.

Once a ConVal elementary school has less than ____ students, we should consider closing it.									
	Antrim	Bennington	Dublin	Francestown	Greenfield	Hancock	Peterborough	Sharon	Temple
25	69%	76%	55%	52%	79%	71%	88%	91%	44%
50	48%	52%	33%	33%	59%	48%	75%	61%	20%
75	17%	19%	9%	14%	23%	17%	40%	33%	10%
100	4%	10%	5%	6%	10%	8%	20%	19%	6%
Never close	31%	24%	45%	48%	21%	29%	12%	9%	56%

On the October follow-up survey, **63% of respondents felt that ConVal should take action on the reconfiguration question in 2024**. Then, given only limited background information, half stated they would support a plan to reduce the number of ES from 8 to 5 or 6. Only 23% outright opposed this option. One-third stated they would support a plan to reduce the number of ES from 8 to 3 or 4; less than half outright opposed this option.

Move to 5 or 6 Elementary Schools



Move to 3 or 4 Elementary Schools



- ◆ ConVal has higher local education tax assessments than most of the peers used in this project.¹ ConVal’s local education tax rate is 21% above the peer average and 36% above the state average. On the September community survey, 55% of ConVal residents overall and 50% of current parents of ConVal students indicated that they felt the district’s current property tax

¹ Prismatic selected 7 NH districts based on enrollment and US Census geography designation.

rates likely deter families from moving here. A majority in every town would prefer reduced taxpayer costs for the same academic rigor.

- ◆ The choice to keep 8 ES in operations has an impact on ConVal’s secondary schooling. There are less secondary course options in ConVal HS compared to some peers. Students and district staff pointed out opportunities they would like secondary students to have, including additional world languages and more advanced STEM coursework.
- ◆ Attracting good teachers to the district is a growing issue. When compared to peer districts, the salary for beginning teachers in ConVal is below average. The same is true for teachers with 5, 10, and 15 years of experience. Below average salaries make the recruitment and retention of teachers much more difficult.
- ◆ As detailed in Chapter 2, there are substantial variations in class size across the 8 ConVal ES. The district also has generally lower class sizes than the peer districts, but this has not translated into routinely higher rates of success on state assessments. Student access to specials (art, music, PE/health, and library/media) is not equal across the ES. Student access to support services (reading interventionists, counselors, and nurses) is not equal across the ES. As detailed in Chapter 3, ConVal teachers feel they do not have sufficient time for collaboration, which would serve to improve horizontal and vertical instructional alignment.
- ◆ The district’s spending on special education students varies among the 8 ES. The district spends slightly more than \$4.5M per year educating its elementary special education students, with a range of \$20,722 at HES to \$36,935 at TES. A number of factors play into per student special education costs, but 1 of them is the number of students needing services at each facility.

The caseloads of ConVal’s elementary special education teachers are low, compared to standards set forth by New Hampshire. The caseloads of related services providers (such as speech pathologists) are also generally low. Moreover, there is a high reliance on 1:1 paraprofessional services in ConVal, that at least in part, could be attributed to the current number of school sites.

- ◆ All 8 ConVal ES are in good repair. The district has been diligent in maintaining and repairing its facilities. It annually spends within the best practice range on building maintenance. In addition, at the end of 2023-24, all bonded indebtedness at ConVal will have been retired.
- ◆ The ConVal food service program is not financially self-sustaining. In 2022-23, the program lost \$203,498, which had to be covered by the district’s general funds. The consulting team found several likely reasons for the losses, including bad debt, insufficient contractor oversight, and low meal participation. The program is challenged by the ES sites, where small enrollments make it difficult to serve them at anything other than a financial loss.
- ◆ Meal options are not equitable across the ES. AES and PES students are offered meals that are like those offered in the middle and high schools, while students in the remaining ES are offered meals in white plastic bags.
- ◆ Technology resources have been provided equitably across the 8 ES. Moreover, the consulting team observed good and generally equitable use of technology across ConVal elementary classrooms.

- ◆ At 4% of total expenditures, the district's current transportation expenses are generally below most of its peers. The 4% figure also compares favorably to the 5% threshold noted as a best practice in the industry.

Conclusions and Reconfiguration Recommendation

As detailed in Chapter 5, Prismatic reached a number of major conclusions that bore upon its ultimate reconfiguration recommendation:

- ◆ The ConVal situation is unusual. The 1967 Articles of Agreement essentially handcuffed the school board in regard to elementary schools. In any other district, the disposition of school facilities is subject to school board vote, not popular vote. This has created a situation where a ConVal ES can decline in enrollment to just a handful of students (or even no students) and the district has no recourse.
- ◆ The district has a surplus of elementary student space across its 8 ES. Prismatic estimates the capacity of the 8 buildings to be 1,540 elementary students. By 2031-32, NESDEC is projecting K-4 enrollment of 798, or roughly half the number of potential seats.
- ◆ Extremely small class size has not been shown to result in outsized performance on state assessments. Research supports the benefits of smaller class sizes (15-20), not extremely small class sizes.
- ◆ Current middle and high school students had mixed opinions regarding their experiences in smaller ConVal ES. They did not evince strong support for maintaining the smaller elementary schools they just left.
- ◆ The ConVal community has some appetite for change; however, it has not historically embraced change. The community and the district have been debating the reconfiguration question for at least a decade, but have not taken action. As any change in ES configuration will require a public vote, this would argue for a smaller reconfiguration recommendation than might be considered ideal by some.

The consulting team considered a wide variety of reconfiguration options, starting from the premise that the status quo might be the best possible arrangement. The consulting team then considered the models explored since 2012 as well as some variations. **Ultimately, the consulting team determined this to be the best option for ConVal now:**

- ◆ **Leave the current MS and HS configuration as is.**
- ◆ **Request that the ConVal community approve a warrant article to keep 4 ES in operation (AES, GES, HES, and PES) and to close the 4 other ES (BES/Pierce, DCS, FES, and TES).**

In order to generate the necessary popular vote for this change and to ease the implementation of this change, the consulting team recommends:

- ◆ **Provide families with options.** Families at each of the closing schools would be able to select 1 of 2 new schools to attend:
 - Former FES and BES/Pierce students can choose AES or GES.
 - Former DCS students can choose HES or PES.
 - Former TES students can choose GES or PES.

The district would provide transportation for these students to these schools.

- ◆ **Commit to before and afterschool programming in at least AES and PES.** This should be available to all students who attend each of these schools, ideally free for low-income families. Transportation to before school programming and from afterschool programming would be the responsibility of the parent.
- ◆ **Provide world language options beginning in MS and expand world language options in HS.** Doing so would begin to address current shortcomings in secondary course offerings. Once this is complete, the district should assess opportunities for further secondary course offerings.

Chapter 5 includes Prismatic’s suggestions for how the district implement its reconfiguration recommendation, including:

- ◆ **Do not reduce staff in the initial rollout.** Instead of making staffing reductions when the 4 ES are closed, Prismatic recommends instead that the district commit to no layoffs or reductions in force. The district should rightsize its staffing through attrition.
- ◆ **Plan for a 3-year implementation timeline.** In Prismatic’s experience, hasty proposed or actual changes in a school district frequently fail. The public often underestimates the thought, planning, and coordination required in making a large change in a multi-site, multi-million-dollar school district. A 3-year implementation timeline would mean that the district and taxpayers would not see immediate cost savings, but it would make it more likely that the change (and resulting annual cost savings) will be successful.

Year 1 (2024-25) would be comprised of planning activities; no schools would be closed.

Year 2 (2025-26) would be comprised of the school closures, initiation of before/after school programming, and initiation of expanded secondary options.

Year 3 (2026-27) would be comprised of assessment of success and consideration of further improvements.

In estimating the cost savings in closing 4 elementary schools, the consulting team considered potential impacts in a number of areas, using conservative figures. These are summarized in the table below, but the community should not expect to see any savings until Year 2 of implementation. Full savings will not be achieved until normal staffing attrition enables the district to reach desired staffing levels.

Estimated Savings of Reconfiguring to 4 Elementary Schools

Area	Specifics	Estimated Annual Savings
Regular Education	The consulting team estimates that a minimum of 16.4 teaching positions could be eliminated.	\$1,198,133
Regular Education	School administrator positions would be reduced by 4.	\$615,604
Special Education	The consulting team estimates that a minimum of 2.5 special education positions could be eliminated.	\$195,405
Facilities	Annual maintenance, repair, and cleaning costs would be eliminated for 4 facilities.	\$645,162
Facilities	Capital improvement costs would be avoided for 4 facilities. These vary from year to year for each facility. They totaled \$428,000 for 2024-25 through 2026-27 for the 4 ES to be closed, an average of \$107,000 per year.	\$107,000
Food Services	Eliminating 4 facilities would both reduce costs (\$56,364) and likely increase meal participation among ES students who move to new facilities (\$7,938).	\$64,302 ²
Technology	Eliminating 4 facilities would reduce building-level Internet access costs and reduce the need for some classroom-level devices.	Not quantified
Transportation	The ConVal cost per bus run is ~\$66,000 per year. The consulting team estimates that an additional 3 bus runs will be needed with the elimination of 4 facilities. Chapter 5 outlines some steps the district could take to reduce this need, including adjusting school start times, but the consulting team has not assumed that the district will do any of them.	-\$198,000
Total		\$2,627,606

The estimated \$2.6M in annual savings is Prismatic's conservative estimate of the annual cost savings, once reconfiguration is fully complete. It does not include costs of the other components Prismatic recommends be done at the same time -- adding before/after school programming and expanding world language into middle schools. Before/after school programming could potentially be provided at a cost-neutral level. Expanding world languages will require a minimum of 2 teachers, 1 at each middle school. Conversely, with reconfiguration, the district could save even more than the \$2.6M estimated. The district could find additional cost savings by:

- ◆ further analyzing regular education staffing needs for additional efficiencies
- ◆ further analyzing special education staffing needs for additional efficiencies
- ◆ taking steps to reduce transportation needs

² At PES, additional wire shelving and a double convection oven will be needed to accommodate higher student enrollment, at an estimated cost of \$15,300.

Taking into account likely new expenses and the potential for additional cost savings, **Prismatic estimates the actual annual cost savings to be a range from \$2.4M to \$4.0M.**

Of course, the answer to the question, “What is best for ConVal students and taxpayers?” should prioritize a response to the first part. **Prismatic asserts that what is best for ConVal students is a smaller number of elementary schools, combined with increased options for secondary students.** The savings to taxpayers are therefore a beneficial, but secondary consideration.