



## The Whitman-Hanson Phoenix Project

---

### **“The Story”**

Will Harris is in the fifth grade of the Conley School in Whitman, Massachusetts. The ten year old is the youngest of three children. His oldest brother, Wayne, graduated from the Whitman-Hanson Regional High School in 2001 and his sister, Wendy, is entering her senior year in the high school. Will’s family moved into the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District in 1998 because of the positive feedback they had heard about the schools regarding facilities, curriculum, programs, and class size. Things have changed!

When Wayne left Whitman-Hanson, he graduated from an old, inadequate building but word was out that the same school committee that had built and refurbished middle and elementary schools in the district were now going to look at a renovation or replacement of the old building with its numerous out-dated portable classrooms. Wayne was a very good student and he hoped to attend a college to study engineering. Although the science labs were inadequate, class size was low in most of Wayne’s courses and he received an outstanding preparation across the board. Wayne’s supplies and text books were also in good shape and of recent publication. When he needed extra help, Wayne used the late buses that were available. Like many students at Whitman-Hanson, Wayne played three sports. He was very pleased that he did not have to pay an athletic users fee like many of his opponents in other schools.

Wayne had heard his teachers and parents talk about the benefits of funding for Whitman-Hanson because of its regionalization incentives in the 1990s and the influx of funding from Education Reform. Other than an outdated building, things were pretty good for Wayne. His choices for further education were unlimited.

Wendy is very excited about school this year. Last year, she and the other students from Whitman-Hanson opened the new high school that had been planned since 2001. She felt bad that her older brother, Wayne, did not have this beautiful new high school with its outstanding technology and grand educational design. She did not like the seven-period schedule that was also new and she noticed that students had study halls that year. This year she was looking forward to the new trimester plan. There would be five classes a day and no studies but she thought that going to music everyday during “Seminar” would be a great opportunity because she had not been able to fit in chorus the past two years. Wendy loved languages and she was able to take four years of Spanish and two years of French. She was part of the last group of students that had foreign language in the middle schools before the courses were cut due to budget pressures. She would have liked to take Latin or even a modern language like Chinese or Arabic but they weren’t available. She thought that she might be able to take one of those courses with the Virtual High School offerings but that program was also cut this year.

Wendy had noticed that many of the courses in the Program of Studies, especially electives, were no longer running. Why did it have to be her senior year? She used to enjoy the Gifted and Talented Programs but they were cut while she was in middle school. She also noticed that her classes were much more crowded than last year and that there was only one security person in the building when there were two last year. Wendy, like her brother, was a great athlete; however, she had to pay a \$150 athletic users fee every year. She also could not believe how much the coaches were talking about fundraisers for uniforms and raising money for things like wrestling mats because of budget cuts.

Wendy is getting ready to apply to colleges and she has noticed that things have been tighter and tighter over the past few years. She still feels proud of the education that she has received at Whitman-Hanson but she is concerned about what is ahead for her brother Will.

Will is in a classroom with 30 other students this year. He is pleased that the school was able to, over time, purchase some new science and social studies texts and he felt good about how he had done on the MCAS science test. He also likes the new social studies book that was purchased the same way. He wished that he could have a new reading program like the kids in second, third and fourth grades but he also heard that money was not available to get the books needed for everyone. He hoped that the middle school did not have the book issues. The larger size was tough this year. Not everyone could be on computers in the computer lab at the same time and the teacher seemed to be overwhelmed with more paper work. He had a question about a math issue but the teacher has not always been able to get to him. He had always found math challenging.

Will had talked to his brother and sister about what it was like when they were at the Conley and at the middle school. He knew that there were many of the same teachers, although some seem to have retired recently. He knew there was more and more pressure with things like MCAS, AYP and No Child Left Behind. He did not really understand all that it meant but he knew that he had to work hard to make progress, even beyond the work he did that was noted on his report card. Sometimes there seemed to be a lot of stress on everyone. He was concerned that some of the programs at the middle school and high school may continue to be dropped in the future. What was the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District going to be like when he graduates in 2014? Will he be prepared for college? Will he have the athletic program his brother and sister enjoyed? What will class size be like then?

Wayne, Wendy and Will Harris represent hundreds of students that have passed or will pass through the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District in the past, present and the future. They have benefited from the dedicated teaching and community commitment to provide them with the best education available to prepare them to be successful in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, funding has been problematic over the past five years. Something needs to be done! That's why the Phoenix Project has been established.

## **The Rest of the Story**

### Regionalization

- Whitman-Hanson regionalized in 1993 and received the benefits of regionalization incentives.
- These incentives dried up after 2001.
- Because of regionalization, Whitman-Hanson receives approximately 30-35% of its funding from the towns and 65 to 70% from the state.
- We have regional transportation reimbursed but it is never 100% of the costs, and it is not predictable and it is distributed at the end of the school year.
- Regionalization requires that the district pay unemployment; the region is partially responsible for insurance for retirees and their spouses.
- After regionalization the district was able to bring back approximately 80 positions that had been cut in the 1980s.
- Since 2001, the district has had to cut 82 positions and numerous programs.
- Regional schools must maintain a reserve fund for emergencies.

### Education Reform and No Child Left Behind

- Massachusetts implemented Education Reform in 1993.
- Funding was strong until 2001.
- MCAS and high stakes testing were introduced.
- Unfunded mandates have been part of Education Reform and NCLB have continued over the years.
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was authorized in 2001.
- Although some funding for academic support was available initially, the promises of NCLB have been under-funded and unmet.
- Education Reform and NCLB have resulted in high expectations and high stakes but with inadequate funding.

### Chapter 70 Funding

- Public schools in Massachusetts are funded through money under the title of Chapter 70.
- Chapter 70 money is distributed through the state during its budget process and was formally listed as the “Cherry Sheets” (the color of the paper they were recorded on).
- The funding process begins in January with the governor’s budget and goes until June or later through the House and Senate.
- Funding that is received after the budget is accepted is kept in the district’s reserves to help pay for emergencies and as revenue for the next year’s budget.
- The formula for Chapter 70 funding is complex and not predictable.
- The concepts of minimum contribution and foundation budget are prescriptive parts of the current budget formula for Chapter 70 that create a great deal of confusion.
- There have been many calls for Chapter 70 reform to allow school budgets to be adequate, equitable and predictable.

### Grants

- The funding of allocation and entitlement grants (Title I, II, IV & V) from the federal government has also been cut over the past few years.
- The most significant reduction has been a 40% cut over the past two years in title I funding, a program that provides instructional support for early readers.
- Although the costs in special education continue to rise, federal funding (IDEA) for students with special needs did not increase this year.
- Grant opportunities from the Massachusetts Department of Education are fewer than ever before and more competitive

### Whitman-Hanson's Budget

- Each year, for the past five years, the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District has attempted to achieve a level service budget. This is the local education budget or LEA.
- A level service budget is one that maintains all staff and programs and only addresses cost of living increases and contractual obligations.
- The Chapter 70 money increases have not kept up with inflation.
- The towns for three years tried to make up the shortfalls but have not been able to keep up with the increases due to the constraints of Proposition 2 ½.
- The school district has had five years of budget freezes in order to provide \$700,000 in revenue for the past five budgets.
- The towns provide 30-35% of the costs of the budget and 65 to 70% comes from the state.
- There is a strong movement to require the state to fund either 50% or 40% for all Chapter 70 funds. This would mean that all towns, including, Whitman and Hanson would be responsible for 50% or 60% of education costs. This would be an increased burden on the towns.

### School Building Assistance

- In the 1990's, Whitman-Hanson built a new middle school in Hanson and refurbished the Indian Head, Conley, Duval and Whitman Middle Schools. Funding for all projects was done through the former SBAB and is not part of Chapter 70 funding.
- SBAB is not part of Chapter 70 funding.
- In 2002 the towns voted to renovate/replace the old Whitman-Hanson Regional High School.
- This was one of the last projects funded at 72% reimbursement by the SBAB.
- The new high school opened in 2005.
- The Park Avenue School was closed in 2006 until it is renovated.
- The Park Avenue School was given a high rating regarding renovation from the new SBA.
- The Maquan School was also given a high rating regarding renovation from the new SBA.

- Initial plans to upgrade the Park Avenue and Maquan Schools are currently underway.

#### Cuts in Positions Since 2001

- Up until 2005 there were 55 staff cuts in the district
- In 2006, after failed overrides, 27 more positions were cut.
- Because of retirements, many of the position cuts were accomplished through attrition, which means that those positions lost through retirements are not replaced
- All schools and all departments have fewer staff than they did in 2001

#### Cuts in Services Since 2001

- We have not been able to replace our outdated computers in the Whitman schools.
- We have lost our teacher who helps students and teachers to integrate technology resources in their teaching and learning.
- We have not had foreign languages in our middle schools since 2002.
- We have cut numerous offerings in the high school including Latin and American Sign Language.
- We have lost our Virtual High School program.
- We have lost our Reading Recovery program in our elementary schools.
- We have lost our Gifted and Talented Program.
- We have lost late buses for extra help for students.
- We have drastically cut back counseling services.
- We have closed the Park Avenue School.
- Class sizes have increased at all grade levels.
- Our district arts programs, especially in music program, are stretched.
- We have not adequately replaced textbooks to keep up with current research and demands of Education Reform.
- We have not been able to provide all of the professional development needed to keep up with current research and demands of Education Reform.
- We introduced and doubled athletic users' fees at the high school.
- Whitman-Hanson is in its third year of a Strategic Plan but budget constraints have kept us from fully meeting our goals.

#### Special Education

- Although the costs of special education are unpredictable and subject to dramatic increases annually, federal funding did not increase this year.
- The state's Special Needs Circuit Breaker funding, although helpful for expensive outside placements, is also unpredictable and not sufficiently funded
- Special needs numbers in the district has increased over the past few years and the costs for mandated special needs services increased 12.04% last year.

#### Budget Busters

- Whitman-Hanson's budget increased 15.19% last year due to health insurance costs.
- Whitman-Hanson's budget increased 7.29% last year due to other insurance costs.

- Whitman-Hanson's budget increased 38.20% last year due to utilities costs.
- Whitman-Hanson's budget increased 12.62% last year due to transportation costs.
- As a result of a state referendum vote several years ago, the district must provide specific English as a Second Language (ESL) services to English Language Learners. Federal funding is not available to districts with fewer than 100 students.

### The End of the Story

There are many families in Hanson and Whitman who have benefited from the educational programs offered by the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District. Many have gone on to further education and are contributing, productive citizens here in Hanson and Whitman, throughout the state and throughout the country. Approximately 90% of our current graduates are going on to further education this year and we are holding our own regarding standardized test scores for MCAS, Advanced Placement courses and SATs, although we are always looking for increases.

Our schools are committed to getting our students ready for the world of work and twenty-first century careers. We are also committed to getting them ready for life with character education, anti-bullying and sensitivity training, and a huge commitment to community service learning. We want our students to be connected with our global community and to be experienced in the arts and the latest in wellness recommendations. We want them to have a rich athletic experience and to know how to use technology effectively and ethically. We want them to respect their environment and each other. We are committed to provide this education by seeking always to do what is Effective, Efficient and Excellent. This is still possible, if we can reach the goals of the Phoenix Project.

The purpose of the Whitman-Hanson Phoenix Project is to work collaboratively with local, regional and state leaders to provide adequate, equitable funding to ensure that the students in the Whitman-Hanson Regional School District receive a high quality education.

The work of the Phoenix Project includes:

- Working with community leaders to find ways to share resources and save local funds;
- Meeting with school committee members, selectmen, finance committee members and members of the community to find ways to lobby effectively with the state legislature to receive adequate state school funding for the Whitman-Hanson District;
- Communicating with all constituents in the two towns in order to better explain the financial challenges faced by the school district and the towns and to gather support for adequate funding on the local level; and

- Committing to creating a school system for the towns of Hanson and Whitman that is effective, efficient and excellent and reflective of the goals and values of the local communities.