

CASE Has Launched!

What is CASE?

The Cape Ann Study for Education (CASE) -- a data-gathering initiative being performed by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) at the request of the Rockport School Committee – formally launched on October 15th. The study's goal is to establish an objective baseline for ongoing strategic planning efforts.

Why is the CASE study necessary?

The Rockport School Committee is mandated by the State of Massachusetts as the governing body to create and present an annual budget for public approval and to chart the future course of the Rockport school system. In late 2017, the Committee felt that ongoing planning efforts would benefit from an objective, third-party review of the challenges impacting our school district by an independent consultant group that had experience with schools facing similar challenges.

What are the goals of CASE?

- To understand the current costs, academic achievements, strengths and weaknesses of the Rockport and Gloucester school districts.
- To examine enrollment trends, associated changes in regional demographics and their impact on the school district budgets and operations to inform strategic plans for the future.
- To explore potential opportunities to share or leverage resources, where they mutually improve academic performance, student growth, scope of academic and extracurricular offerings and environment and reduce costs.

Who is involved in this study?

School districts face federal, state and local constraints, some of which are common, some unique. To help reduce the cost of the study, the Committee reached out to school districts in the Cape Ann area. Our closest neighbor, Gloucester, agreed that this study could be beneficial for Cape Ann students and is sharing equally in the costs and results generated by the study.

Who is a part of the CASE team?

The CASE Steering Committee consists of five members: The Chair and Vice Chair of the Rockport and Gloucester School Committees, the Superintendents of the Rockport and Gloucester school systems and the Assistant Superintendent of the Gloucester school system (who has had the benefit of working for both the Rockport and Gloucester School systems during the last five years). This core team has set up the parameters of the study and will provide on-going guidance and access to the Donahue Institute for some areas of focus within the study.

What Comes Next?

The CASE project plan was finalized on October 31st. Monthly check-in meetings with the Steering Committee have begun, data is being pulled and evaluated and subject matter experts and key stakeholders will soon be interviewed. A preliminary briefing of the report will occur to the Steering Committee by mid-March 2020, with a final report by the end of the month. After the Steering Committee has had time to critically review the data, results will be shared with the general public and town committees as a part of the School Committee's strategic planning process.

How do I stay informed about CASE?

The Rockport School Committee takes its obligation to communicate to the community extremely seriously, but is also aware that in an age of social media, complex issues can often be simplified to the point where they don't reflect reality. The School Committee will be issuing periodic updates (synchronized with the schedule above) and is always available to answer any questions about the study, whether at our regularly scheduled meetings, at our email address (schoolcommittee@rpk12.org) or in person. The Committee will also hold public meetings to share the results of the study.

Anything else I should know about CASE?

Yes. Already there are some frequently asked questions (FAQs). Here's a few:

- ***Will CASE prevent the need for a prop 2.5 override?***
It will not. Structurally, overrides are impossible to avoid, give the impact of unfunded or underfunded state mandates and other factors. The Rockport School Committee clearly estimates when they anticipate an override and works hard with the town to manage resources as effectively as possible. CASE does have the potential to identify places where Rockport and Gloucester may be able to share resources, potentially improving options for students in both districts and reducing costs.
- ***Is CASE really about regionalizing with Gloucester?***
No. Funding the schools in any town or city can be polarizing. Rockport is no stranger to this. The Rockport School Committee has seen its share of alternative budgeting and staffing plans presented to it that are uninformed by current state requirements and the unique needs of today's students. These proposals often focus funding challenges on specific student populations or needs as the source of cost increase. CASE was designed to create a "fresh" baseline with new data from a third-party subject matter expert to take a fresh look at the challenges we face together on Cape Ann and in particular in Rockport. CASE is a data gathering, baseline exercise, whereas "regionalization" is a solution to a clearly defined problem (which may have other solutions such as new worker housing, etc.). We have opted to gather the data free from trying to prove or disprove the worth of regionalization, as we believe that to be the most appropriate starting point.

- ***But wouldn't we save money by regionalizing with Gloucester?***

There is no solid data that suggests costs per student would be reduced (or increased) with regionalization. Rather than debate the point without facts, both Rockport and Gloucester have agreed to use the CASE study to identify areas where we might be able to immediately improve student options and (secondarily) save money. We have chosen not to limit UMDI in exploring the full range of possible opportunities for collaboration – which could include maintaining the status quo, potential shared scheduling of music, engineering or Special Education programs, partial or full regionalization or other scenarios they might discover. The data and options generated from CASE would then be analyzed by the two respective School Committees for inclusion into their strategic plans and ultimately the two committees would decide independently what options were viable for their community and what proposals, if any, they would recommend to their voters.

To recap: Regionalization is not the goal (nor is it excluded) from the data and options generated by this study. It's also worth pointing out that even if regionalization were to be proposed, recommended by both School Committees and voted on by both the Town of Rockport and City of Gloucester, these sorts of efforts typically take 8-10 years to complete and thus does not exempt Rockport from establishing a budget that funds our schools adequately.

- ***Will there be savings as a result of CASE?***

We are hopeful that is the case, but those savings are secondary to improved opportunities for the students of Cape Ann.

- ***Will CASE answer all of the questions we need to have answered?***

No, not all of the answers. The conclusion of CASE in March will hopefully identify options for resource sharing and cost savings for both Rockport and Gloucester with options for further development. The CASE report will undoubtedly provide areas for further examination, which both School Committees will discuss with their community. It is fully anticipated that the conclusion of the CASE effort in March, further information will be needed to develop, evaluate and carry out some of the options that are identified or proposed. The Rockport School Committee has already discussed with their state representatives that future funding support may be needed and have received positive reactions to the concept.