



Barnum-Moose Lake-Willow River School Board Cooperative Committee October 2020

In early 2020, School Board Chairs from Barnum, Moose Lake, and Willow River began meeting to discuss opportunities to share costs and services between the three districts. Previous conversations had been ongoing between superintendents, and the chairs decided to build on these relationships and expand discussions to the board level. A lot was going on in the three schools in the pre-COVID period: declining enrollment, budget challenges, staffing decisions, and our communities pushing for more sharing of costs.

District cooperation is nothing new. Discussions surrounding various topics have been presented over the past 50 years. Before the discussions fell apart (usually related to the issue of consolidation), new cooperative ventures were identified and initiated. Past cooperative opportunities between Barnum, Moose Lake, and Willow River have been quite successful. The 30+ year old Moose Lake-Willow River Athletic Cooperative is one of the oldest and best in the state. Currently, the three districts share costs and staffing through a variety of agreements and programs at the local, regional, and state levels, and there is always room to expand. A recent transportation cooperative agreement between Barnum and Moose Lake is expected to create efficiencies and cost savings for each district.

In July, we brought the idea of formally creating a Cooperative Committee to our respective boards. The Committee would be made up of Board Chairs, and two Board Members from each district. Our Superintendents would join the committee in once-a-month meetings to discuss possible opportunities in which we could share and cooperate beyond what we are currently doing. With overwhelming support from the three boards, the Committee was formed and the challenge of determining when and how to conduct our first meeting began. We wanted to meet in person and not via Zoom, but we were limited to the number of in-person participants because of COVID-19 meeting guidelines.

Finally, in August 2020, we were able to meet in person and had a number of items we wanted to discuss. As a committee, we unanimously agreed that our purpose was not to pursue consolidation, but rather to take steps toward continuing and expanding cooperation between the districts. We also adopted a mission statement to remind us of why we were meeting:

*Working together for the success of our students and the benefit of our communities
by exploring opportunities for sharing and collaborating now and into the future.*

Willow River Board Chair, Dave Prachar, presented local demographics and census data for our area. The data shows that although our total population is not declining, the age of our population will increase. In other words, our residents will get older and the number of school age pupils will decline. Because districts depend on student numbers for the majority of their revenue, this shift in the demographic is alarming to all of us. As districts who are already struggling financially, these trends point toward increasing revenue while decreasing costs. Based on the data presented, increasing revenue (more students) does not seem likely. Cuts to programs and staff over the past and even through the present decrease costs, but the quality of education begins to see negative effects. Working together through cooperative opportunities are another opportunity to save money that, when implemented right, will have no effect on the quality of education, and many times will increase opportunity and improve quality with cost savings. As one committee member stated, "As long as it doesn't cost more than it currently does, and we can improve what we offer, it's a success."

By our next meetings, COVID numbers were increasing statewide and in our communities. Changes in our learning models were taking place. Our superintendents have been closely communicating all along, and hearing from them, as well as board members was comforting. Families and students in all of our districts were exploring alternatives to public school education (online learning, homeschooling, etc). This resulted in significant drops in our ADM (Average Daily Membership), a number that ties directly to revenue. Declining ADM, and related declining revenue affects not only rural Minnesota Schools, but public schools across the country. The potential benefit of the Cooperative Committee was never more apparent.

Our meetings rotate between each school (as hosts). Committee members have expressed excitement about discussion topics and a positive feeling that we can be successful in what we are working toward. As part of our local community, we enjoy the opportunity to meet with each other and check in on how things are going. We are establishing relationships with one another and within our schools. Building relationships and trust within our districts is key to having open conversations and being willing to try something different. A general consensus among committee members is "if it saves one district and doesn't cost more to the other districts, we should do it." That sums up the sense of cooperation and success and shows the support for one another we are building. We are in this together.

Colleen Feters, Board Chair, Barnum Public Schools, ISD #91
Steven Blondo, Board Chair, Moose Lake Community School, ISD #97
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