

WISCASSET SCHOOL DEPARTMENT

83 Federal St.

Wiscasset, Maine 04578

The upcoming school year will create a great deal of inquiry and work as Wiscasset makes decisions about the future of the school unit. Currently, having officially withdrawn from the RSU 12 by community vote, the Wiscasset School Department is a “stand alone” unit with no ties whatsoever to the operation of any other school system even though the RSU will serve as the fiscal agent for WSD for 2014-2015.

Thus, according to the laws of the State of Maine, the Wiscasset School Committee will be responsible for developing long range plans for the design and operation of educational programming for all Wiscasset students. As was evident in the development of the initial budget for the Wiscasset School Department for the 2014-2015 school year, funding and taxation will be a huge issue. The Town of Wiscasset has voted to become an independent school system; now the WSC must find the most efficient, cost-effective, and streamlined design for the physical plant to accommodate the community’s goals.

Since virtually all costs of any school system are dictated by enrollment figures, it will be wise to review the 20 year history of the Wiscasset school age population.

Also it will be beneficial to access the Town of Wiscasset live birth records from the past 10 years which should become a valid projection for class sizes entering the Wiscasset schools over the next 10 years. Figures below were supplied by the Wiscasset Town Office.

2004=30	2010=39
2005=34	2011=33
2006=34	2012=28
2007=40	2013=29
2008=46	2014=12(to date)
2009=38	

Currently, kindergarten has a fall 2014 enrollment of 47 students which reflects partial years of 2008 and 2009 combined and appears consistent with the birth rates recorded for these years. However, the next 5 years clearly establish a pattern of lower birth rates.

Finally, the capacity of each of the three school buildings in the Wiscasset School System should be reviewed in their current utilization. Since the time of their construction, each of the buildings has seen a change in usage and space requirements for subsequent programs developed or required, and these changes should be reflected in any rated student capacity of each building. Currently, the estimated capacity of each school reflects the recent patterns of occupancy and usage. Please note that in 1988, the Wiscasset Primary School scheduled 4 sections of each grade, and that number is now 2 sections of each grade.

Wiscasset Primary School was built in 1973 to serve grades K-4. In 1985, the enrollment was 239 students while in 1995 the enrollment was 271, falling to 189 in 2005. In 2013-2014, the school population was 156 students in K-4, and the opening enrollment for 2014-2015 will be approximately 172 students, some 69 fewer than 20 years

earlier. This figure is approximately 65%-70% of student enrollment from two decades earlier.

Wiscasset Middle School was built in three different construction efforts, 1951, 1968, and renovation in 2004. The building housed roughly 220 students at its peak occupancy in the late 1990's, but last year the student population was 173 in grades 5-8. The enrollment for 2014-2015 will be approximately 162 students, suggesting that the WMS is being utilized at 73% capacity due to reduced enrollment.

Wiscasset High School was constructed in 1961 with an addition to the facility constructed in 1974. Since that time WHS has housed grades 9-12 continually. Over the last 20 years, the maximum reported enrollment for WHS was 448 students in the 1997-1998 school year. Last year, the 2013-2014 school year, the high school enrollment had dipped to 208 students and this year 2014-2015 WHS will open with approximately 210 students. This decline in the number of high school students simply suggests that the high school facility is currently being used at 46% capacity of previous high enrollments; with a creative vision, Wiscasset High School can accommodate an additional 200 students.

Recent Wiscasset High School Enrollment

	2005-2006 - 346
1994-1995 - 427	2006-2007 - 319
1995-1996 - 425	2007-2008 - 295
1996-1997 - 432	2008-2009 - 248
1997-1998 - 448	2009-2010 - 231
1998-1999 - 435	2010-2011 - 205
1999-2000 - 430	2011-2012 - 215
2000-2001 - 413	2012-2013 - 214
2001-2002 - 401	2013-2014 - 208
2002-2003 - 409	
2003-2004 - 363	
2004-2005 - 358	

Budget, Costs, and Taxation

As is well recognized in the community, the town vote of November 2013 that authorized the official withdrawal of Wiscasset from RSU 12 also required the establishment of a municipal school department which began formal operation on July 1 of this year as mandated by State of Maine Statute. The startup of the Wiscasset School Department in 2014

required the election of a new municipal school committee, a formal plan for providing education to all Wiscasset students, development of an official operating budget approved by town vote, as well as a two page list of management responsibilities to assure that the schools would be legally up and running for a fall opening. This has been accomplished, and in September, Wiscasset schools will open under the local control of the Wiscasset School Committee.

The work completed is only the beginning, however, since the budget adopted by the community raised the cost to local taxpayers by nearly 100%, a condition that must be addressed in ensuing budget years. The Wiscasset School Committee is well aware of the added burden to the local taxpayers and is committed to exhausting all avenues to reduce the ongoing costs of schools.

The first effort to reduce costs will involve developing a plan to house all students in two buildings rather than three. For several years controversy has swirled around the opinions of which of the two buildings serving grades K-8 will best accommodate change and adoption of a new population into the facility, but virtually everyone agrees that the School Committee should not keep three buildings in operation when only two are needed. And since closing a school is a community decision requiring a formal town vote, the Wiscasset School Committee will enter into a formal dialogue involving the community in order to make a wise and satisfactory recommendation.

Following is information about each of the schools to be considered in a final decision of which of the Wiscasset school buildings should remain open. Costs are a critical consideration, but educational considerations will ultimately determine the best situation for the students of Wiscasset.

Wiscasset Primary School

The primary school is suitable for all Wiscasset students, grades K-6. Minimal internal changes will be necessary to accommodate the addition of grades 5&6, and there is currently an abundance of furniture and equipment at the site which can be returned to active service. It appears clear that grades 5&6 can be housed within their own wing of the facility and that younger grades/students can continue to enjoy a setting where they enjoy the safety and comfort of an early childhood environment. The School Committee is very aware of the need for reasonable distribution of age spans within the school so that younger students and older students in the same facility can be treated in an age-appropriate manner.

Wiscasset Middle School

The WMS could also accommodate all K-8 students, but it appears that greater obstacles exist to transferring five grades (grades K-4) into the WMS than exist in transferring two grades (grades 5&6) into the primary school. And although there appears to be sufficient room for 334 students and 24 teachers at WMS, numerous constrictions hamper operations for a younger population. An architectural study performed in the 1990's identified a variety of changes, renovations, and upgrades that would be necessary to house the primary school population. These recommendations included bathroom work, playground work, classroom renovations, handicap accessibility, stairway safety concerns, parking lot improvements and additional costly alterations. A recent conversation with the architect who performed the survey elicited the recommendation to close the middle school.

Discussions so far have led to an investigation of the feasibility of assigning grades 7&8 to the high school which can easily absorb the additional 85+/- students in the building. Although no immediately clear design has been identified, several options are being considered to ensure that a middle school program can be added to the facility so that a desired separation will exist between the middle and high school programs.

The Wiscasset School Committee will include the discussion of school facilities in its upcoming meetings, and the Committee will schedule one special meeting devoted exclusively to the discussion. Shortly the Committee will request that the Town establish a date for a referendum vote required of the town, and a formal hearing will be held prior to that public vote. The vote to close a school must gain voter approval as required by MSRA Title 20A, Chapter 202, Sec. 4101-4104. The Wiscasset School Committee urges each resident of the town to attend these meetings, to access the best and

most current information, to question individual members of the Committee, or to arrange a meeting with the Superintendent of Schools (882-4104 or lbeverage@wiscassetschools.org) to satisfy questions or concerns.