

RSU 5 and Pownal Elementary: Key Facts

Prepared March 2026

All figures in this document are derived from publicly available data: RSU 5 adopted budgets and budget handbooks, the Superintendent's proposed budget articles, Maine Department of Education subsidy and expenditure reports, Town Assessor records (Pownal, Durham, Freeport), U.S. Census/ACS data, and Maine statute. Financial models were independently constructed from these primary sources and reconciled against RSU-stated totals. A complete list of 70+ citations with source URLs, peer-reviewed research references, and detailed methodology appears in the companion *RSU 5 Analysis: Budget, Education, and Community Impact* (the "Omnibus"). Section references below point to that document for full data, context, and citations.

"PES costs too much per student." PES costs approximately \$26,649/student vs. the district average of ~\$24,000. This premium exists because fixed costs (principal, custodian, nurse, building) are spread across only 105 students. It is a real cost the district absorbs (\$267K/year under the omnibus consumption allocation model, which assigns each school's budget to the town whose students it serves). However, PES's budget **grew slower than every other elementary** (FY22 to FY27): PES +38%, DCS +46%, MLS +43%, MSS +42%. PES has the **lowest absolute budget** of any school (\$2.27M). The per-student premium is driven by enrollment, not spending. Adding just 15 students (to 120) through attendance zone redistricting brings PES to the district average (Path D). (*Omnibus, Sections 3.1–3.4, 5.3, 2.7*)

"Closing PES saves \$2 million." After accounting for the cost of educating 105 Pownal students at other schools and 8 new bus routes, closing PES produces a **net annual cost of ~\$87,000 to ~\$161,000**, not savings. The lower figure reflects absorption and transportation costs alone; the higher figure includes \$74K/year in amortized costs for converting PES into a centralized preschool center under Scenario 2. Both figures are net costs, not savings. The LD 345 EC SpEd mandate creates facility modification costs under any path: under the no-closure path, adding an EC SpEd classroom at MSS costs an estimated \$2,500 to \$16,000/year (amortized); under the closure path, converting PES to a preschool center costs \$74,000/year. Both estimates are derived from Chapter 124 requirements, the MSS deferred maintenance inventory, and architect conversion benchmarks (C-ECFacility). Risk-adjusted (property values, attrition, transition): **-\$408K to -\$897K/year**. (*Omnibus, Sections 2.2, 2.3, 4.4, 4.5*)

"PES enrollment is declining." PES is the **only elementary in RSU 5 with consistent enrollment growth**: up from 89 (FY24) to 105 (FY27 projected), an 18% recovery. MSS (-42) and MLS (-17) are declining. (*Omnibus, Section 1.4*)

"PES is overstaffed." PES suffered the **largest staffing decline of any school** over the past nine years (-28.4%), more than double the next largest decline (FHS: -12.4%). Four of six schools lost FTE; only MSS and MLS grew. Central office grew +13.3%. PES's share of district staff (~4.5%) is roughly half its share of students (~10.5%). Maine DOE content-area data shows the decline is also qualitative: PES lost dedicated ELA specialist (0.9 FTE) and Math specialist (1.4 FTE) classroom assignments by 2019, plus Teacher Support Team Members (3.0 → 0.0 FTE) and most Ed Tech II positions (4.4 → 0.5 FTE). PES students have progressively less access to subject-area intervention and support. (*Omnibus, Sections 1.5, 3.5*)

"The budget keeps going up because of PES." The RSU total budget grew from \$29.5M to \$47.4M over a decade (+61%). Comparing all schools on adopted budgets (FY22 to FY27), PES grew **38%**, slower than

DCS (46%), MLS (43%), and MSS (42%). PES had the smallest dollar increase of any school (\$625K vs. \$1.4M to \$2.5M for other elementaries). MSS faces the same per-student cost pressure as PES: its per-student cost grew 56% as enrollment declined. (*Omnibus, Section 3.4*)

"RSU 5's budget is out of control." RSU 5 spends **\$20,344/pupil** (FY25 actual). The state average is **\$19,804**, only 2.7% less. Nearby comparable districts spend far more: MSAD 51 Cumberland \$22,054, RSU 21 Kennebunk \$23,866, RSU 75 Topsham \$24,452. Budget increases of **5% to 10%/year** are the norm across Maine right now, driven by health insurance (10-17%/year increases), salary obligations (78-80% of all district budgets), and special education growth. RSU 5's proposed FY27 increase (6.53%) falls in the middle of peer districts (3.9% to 9.88%). These pressures are structural and statewide, not unique to RSU 5. (*Omnibus, Section 3.7*)

"We have to close PES to meet the EC SpEd mandate." The LD 345 mandate (Title 20-A §7209-A) requires only special education services for children ages 3–5 with disabilities — not a general PreK program. Community PreK programs are voluntary under Maine law (DOE: "public preschool programming remains optional"). The mandate can be met with one EC SpEd classroom at MSS, which already hosts the largest community PreK program (64 students) and provides strong LRE ratios. All three towns can continue their existing community PreK programs at their local schools. The Board approved joining Cohort 3 on February 4, 2026. Cohort 3 is phased: Year 1 (FY27) serves 4-year-olds only (~25 students) at a net local cost of approximately \$17,300/year, with most costs covered by state incentive funding. Year 2 (FY28) must add 3-year-olds. Scenario 2's proposal to centralize *all* PreK (~128 students from all three towns) at PES is significantly broader than what the mandate requires. (*Omnibus, Sections 2.1, 2.2, 2.3*)

"What about making PES a district-wide 6th grade school?" (Scenario 3) The Superintendent's Scenario 3 converts PES into a single-grade school for all district 6th graders (~157 students). Pownal K-5 students still move to DCS. The presentation itself acknowledges that Scenario 3 does not solve the EC SpEd mandate ("offers no solution for 3 yos") and "still represents disproportionate change for Pownal." A 157-student single-grade school requires full content-area staffing (Art, Music, World Language, SpEd, PE, and all core subjects) with poor economy of scale. Our Path A achieves the same district-wide middle school integration by placing grade 6 at DCS and grades 7-8 at FMS, without displacing any school from its community. Under both Scenario 2 and Scenario 3, Pownal loses PES as a K-5 school. The specific repurposing is secondary to whether Pownal should lose its school at all. (*Omnibus, Sections 2.3a, 2.4*)

"There's no alternative to closing PES." Four alternatives have been analyzed. Path A (middle school grade consolidation) saves **\$479K to \$804K/year RSU-wide** while preserving all schools. Path D (attendance zone redistricting) brings students from nearby Durham and Freeport areas that are geographically closer to PES than to their current schools, eliminating the per-student cost premium at 120 enrollment. Voluntary school choice already exists but has not been promoted. A modest formula adjustment (85/15) combined with Path A produces net assessment decreases for **all three towns**. All can be accomplished by Board vote. (*Omnibus, Sections 2.2, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7*)

"Closing PES would improve education quality." Research says otherwise. A Danish study found short-term **negative** effects on achievement when small schools close, strongest for displaced students

(Heinesen, 2022). An Arkansas study found **no evidence** that consolidation improves classroom outcomes (Coulson & Bhatt, 2022). A Texas study found per-pupil costs **increased** while achievement **decreased** after consolidation. Building transitions alone — even without closure — reduce academic growth (Barnes, 2022). Beyond academics, forced transitions cause fatigue, anxiety, depression, and loss of peer/teacher connections, with **disproportionate harm to neurodivergent students** (Sideropoulos et al., 2024; Rumberger, 2015). PES has a **9:1 student-teacher ratio** (best in the district), class sizes of 13-18 students, and proficiency rates well above state averages (reading 85-95%, math 75-82% vs. state 61%/57%). Under Path B, PES students would move to 20-24 student classes at DCS. Project STAR and Chetty et al. (2011) demonstrate lasting benefits of small classes in early grades: higher college attendance and earnings into adulthood. All RSU 5 schools perform well. RSU 5 ranks **#16 of 189 Maine districts** (top 10%). (*Omnibus, Sections 1.8, 4.6*)

"PES is the problem building." PES has had its windows replaced (2020-21) and lighting upgraded (2025-26). The more pressing facility risk is **MSS (Morse Street School)**, which has multiple systems at end-of-life and is on a constrained downtown lot with **no play fields** and only one playground (paving deferred since 2019). In 2016, safety netting (\$22K) was needed to protect MSS's playground from stray baseballs from adjacent FHS fields. Maine Chapter 124 requires **75 sq ft of outdoor space per preschool child**; MSS's 64 PreK students need 4,800 sq ft on a lot that cannot provide it adequately. Estimated deferred maintenance: **\$350K-\$400K**. A major renovation could cost **\$10M-\$20M** based on the FHS precedent. PES (rural lot, ample outdoor space, natural environment) is the RSU 5 school **best suited** for preschool programs under state standards, while MSS is the least suited. PES's 75 unused seats are the district's only spare elementary capacity. (*Omnibus, Sections 1.6, 1.7, 1.8*)

"This is a new problem." Cost-sharing and PES cost concerns have been documented for **17 years**, since before RSU 5 opened in 2009. Pownal's middle school was closed in 2010. The Finance Committee has recommended formula reform twice (2019, 2023); neither has been adopted. (*Omnibus, Part VIII*)

"The cost-sharing formula is fair." / "The cost-sharing formula is unfair." Both claims are partially correct, depending on the metric. **When state aid is included**, each town's total contribution is close to its share of students: Pownal contributes **10.96%** of total funding for **10.41%** of students. The Finance Committee reached the same conclusion in 2019. **When only local taxes are counted**, significant disparities emerge (Freeport \$23,901/student, Pownal \$21,699, Durham \$11,034), but this gap exists because the state directs \$6M in aid to Durham based on its lower property values, which is state policy working as intended. The two perspectives describe the same system from different angles. Understanding both is essential. (*Omnibus, Sections 5.1, 5.2, 5.5*)

"What does Pownal actually pay?" Pownal's FY27 RSU assessment: **\$4,448,225** (58.4% of Pownal's total tax bill). Including state aid, Pownal's total contribution per student is **\$24,465**, compared to Durham's **\$19,693** and Freeport's **\$25,266**. The per-student gap between high-valuation and low-valuation towns exists because state policy directs more aid to communities with lower property values. (*Omnibus, Sections 5.1, 5.3*)

"What happens next?" The Board approved joining EC SpEd Cohort 3 on February 4, 2026. The rollout is phased: **Year 1 (FY27, 2026–2027)** serves 4-year-olds only (~25 students) at a net local cost of approximately **\$17,300/year** (most costs state-funded). **Year 2 (FY28, 2027–2028)** must expand to include 3-year-olds, at

uncertain additional cost. The FY28 baseline is approximately **\$50.2M–\$50.8M** depending on how much the EC SpEd program scales. A **\$100K districtwide facilities study** was also approved in February 2026. A draft RFQ scopes the work as a **Comprehensive Facility Study and 10-Year Long-Range Master Plan** — not just a building-condition survey, but a full planning exercise including demographic projections, alternative district-wide configurations, transportation logistics, space reuse analysis, and community engagement across all three towns. The draft timeline targets delivery by **December 2026**. The FY27 budget goes to referendum in June 2026. The master plan will professionally evaluate many of the same configuration questions at the center of the PES debate, and its results are expected before any restructuring would take effect. On March 23, 2026, Superintendent Gray presents his restructuring proposal ("Planning for the Future of RSU 5") to the Pownal Select Board. The presentation covers three scenarios but contains no financial modeling for any of them. The Pownal Select Board has also placed a draft letter on the same agenda that formally contests the "repurposing" characterization of the PES conversion as "school closing" and initiates FOAA requests for financial data needed to evaluate withdrawal under §1466. Path A (grade consolidation), Path D (attendance zone redistricting for PES), formula adjustments, and binding school protections can all be pursued in 2026. (*Omnibus, Sections 1.6, 1.7, 2.1, 2.7, 2.9, 6.10, 8.4*)

"Why does this keep happening?" The same cycle has repeated for 17 years: budget pressure emerges, restructuring proposals disproportionately affect Pownal (middle school closure 2010, staffing reductions 2015, PES conversion 2026), the community mobilizes, and the decision is either adopted without Pownal's support or deferred without resolution. The underlying structural issues are never addressed, trust erodes, and the next cycle starts from a lower baseline. The deeper problem is not the cost-sharing formula (which is already near-proportional when state aid is included). It is the absence of a **two-way communications infrastructure** between the RSU and its communities. Residents have no accessible explanation of *why* the budget increased by a specific amount or where genuine discretion exists -- they cannot meaningfully distinguish a 6.5% increase from an 8% increase. The Board has no structured mechanism for gauging community appetite for spending levels early enough to shape the budget responsively. The budget process runs almost entirely inside the administration and Board from September through March; the community's only input is a binary yes/no vote on the finished product in June. This is fixable: fall community forums explaining cost drivers *before* the budget is built, a plain-language decomposition of the adopted budget *before* the referendum, and a standing Strategic Planning Council that maintains continuity year-round. The RSU's draft RFQ for the facilities study proposes weighting 25% of the evaluation on community engagement quality. The annual operating budget deserves the same standard. (*Omnibus, Sections 7.3, 7.4, 7.5*)

"How can we prevent this from happening again?" The structural fix is the budget transparency and community engagement infrastructure described above -- closing the feedback loop so the cycle doesn't repeat. But institutional culture can change with Board composition, and engagement structures only work if sustained. Binding legal protections provide the backstop. If Pownal stays in RSU 5, several layers exist: the Reorganization Plan can be amended (voter-approved, hard to reverse) to broadly define "school closure" and require a supermajority plus host-town referendum. Pownal's legislative delegation can pursue a **private and special law** that overrides Board authority entirely. An interlocal agreement under 30-A §2203 is enforceable in court. Current law (§1512) already requires a referendum for closure, but does not clearly cover

"reconfiguration." Multiple layers of protection are recommended. (*Omnibus, Sections 6.10, 7.3, 7.4, 7.5*)

"Could Pownal withdraw from RSU 5?" Maine law provides a 22-step withdrawal process used by 15+ towns since 2013. Freeport nearly left in 2014 (failed by 76 votes). Financial modeling projects that Scenario B (standalone K-5 with full 6-12 tuition) could **save Pownal approximately \$155,000/year** at FY28 projected rates under low-cost assumptions, inclusive of a \$50K/year SpEd risk reserve. Under high-cost assumptions, Scenario B carries a small net cost (~\$79K/year at FY28 rates, ~\$124/household). More advanced configurations produce stronger savings: shared administration (Scenario C) saves ~\$275,000/year, and K-8 PES expansion (Scenario E) saves ~\$189,000/year. All estimates use low/high ranges to reflect uncertainty in costs that have not been negotiated (food service, IT, insurance, capital reserve). Year 1 carries additional one-time costs (uncapped secondary tuition penalty of ~\$124K, startup costs of \$40K to \$90K, process costs of ~\$70K) partially or fully offset by Pownal's share of the RSU 5 fund balance return (\$190K to \$315K). Savings exist not because Pownal is being overcharged (its total contribution including state aid is near-proportional), but because its high property valuation generates a large state-determined local contribution that exceeds the cost of educating its students independently. Tuition costs are computed under two statutes: §5804 for grades 6-8 (elementary, capped at the receiving district's per-pupil cost: ~\$15,417/student FY26) and §5805 for grades 9-12 (secondary, capped at the state average: ~\$15,055/student FY26). Special education for tuitioned students is billed separately at actual cost under §7302, on top of base tuition. RSU 5's financial impact under withdrawal is approximately budget-neutral when tuition revenue (including SpEd billing) is accounted for at projected rates. (*Omnibus, Sections 6.2, 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, 6.8*)

For complete data, sources, and methodology, see: RSU 5 Analysis: Budget, Education, and Community Impact (Omnibus), March 2026.