

Premise of one of Valley RSU's main concerns 'flawed'

By Elizabeth Deprey

ST. JOHN VALLEY – The Maine Children's Alliance gave members of the legislature an update on the school consolidation process, a "part two" of the "Case for Cooperation" report issued last August.

The report calls the consolidation effort "overdue."

MCA said that when the Sinclair Act that formed the current school unit system passed, "less than half of all Maine students graduated from high school."

It adds that today, "virtually every" job requires high school and most positions require college.

It also states that when the Sinclair Act came, population in the state was rising, while it is now decreasing.

"Both supporters of consolidation and its adversaries underesti-

mate, the scale of change it requires, and sometimes misunderstand or misrepresent what can and should be accomplished at the local and regional level," the report reads.

MCA states that consolidation discussions need to revolve around "better use of financial and educational resources."

The report finds that budgetary concerns are the main holdup of the Regional School Unit plans.

It also states, however, that many of these financial discussions should instead be about educational welfare.

"Several RPCs, for instance, have become fixated on the difficulties of coordinating teacher salaries among districts with varying pay scales," the report reads.

"The assumption is that all current members paying less will then have to pay more under consolida-

tion, overwhelming any savings from administrative efficiencies."

This is one of the main issues the Valley RPC is facing.

But, the report states, "The premises of these discussions are flawed, however."

MCA states that the key to this issue is to have "better paid teachers but fewer of them, statewide."

"This is a necessary trade-off," MCA states.

The report found that class sizes are shrinking statewide, driving the costs per student higher.

The author of the report says the widespread skepticism and hostility is due to the way the lawmakers wrote the law.

The education committee came up with three plans, each with different methods and goals, and so the appropriations committee came up with their own plan.

"The process was driven by the

need to create \$36 million in savings, as proposed by the governor, in the state's contribution to local budgets for the 2009 fiscal year."

The emphasis on quick results, said the report's author, has posed problems and created an emphasis on budgets rather than education.

"The evidence to date is that financial issues are preventing consolidation that might otherwise take place, and that the emphasis on money tends to drive negotiators apart rather than bring them together."

Another issue is local control.

The report found, however, that

"local" is a changing word, with most Mainers working outside of the towns in which they live, and students are living farther from their "local schools."

The MCA also found that the plan asks for consideration of issues about money and the new school board, but not about education.

The second part of the report describes the proposed legislation to alter the consolidation bill, and calls for enhanced facilitation, curriculum standards, assessing facility needs and clarifying incentives.

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The report also sees upcoming problems in school choice, local debt and contract areas as the process continues.

The initial "Case for Cooperation" report outlined the possible educational and financial benefits to reorganizing the existing 290 school administrative units into no more than 80.

This "White Paper" report is actually the first two chapters of a report due out later this spring.

Douglas Rooks, a veteran journalist and consultant, wrote the report for the Maine Children's Alliance.