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Testimony Regarding Legislative Proposals
Relative to School Administrative Unit
Consolidation and Other Related Issues

Senator Bowman, Representative Norton, Senator Rotundo, Representative Fisher and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Education and Cultural Affairs and Appropriations and Financial Affairs, I am Kim Bedard, President of the Maine School Boards Association (MSBA) and a member of the Kittery School Committee. I appear before you today representing the Board of Directors of MSBA.

Let me begin by saying that the Maine School Boards Association is committed to the efficient and cost effective delivery of high quality educational services to Maine's students. We are proud of Maine's schools and the quality of education they are providing to Maine's students. Although Maine is a relatively poor state, our students are performing above the national averages and our rate of high school graduation is above the national norm. We recognize that our students must continue to improve.

We also recognize that Maine taxpayers' dollars must be spent wisely. Toward this end, we as an association applaud and support efforts to make our school systems more efficient through interlocal cooperation, regionalization of specific administrative functions and educationally appropriate consolidation of school administrative units. We recognize that Maine faces serious challenges due to its high property tax burden, its geography, its large number of relatively small schools, and its projected declines in student enrollment.

We believe that the voters' rejection of the Palesky and TABOR initiatives, tells us two things. Yes, Maine voters want to reduce their property taxes, but No, Maine voters do not want to do so in an arbitrary or formula-driven manner that creates more problems than it solves. We believe that faced with these serious challenges, provided with accurate data, and presented with carefully developed choices, Maine people will make the right decisions for our communities and this State.

For that reason we believe that proposals for cooperation, regional service delivery and school consolidation must be based on the following principles:



1. The goal must be to deliver excellence in education in a cost-effective manner;
2. The plans for achieving greater efficiencies must be based on accurate data and appropriate study and must include options for cooperation, regional service delivery and educationally appropriate school consolidation;
3. The process for developing these initiatives must be broadly inclusive so that all stakeholders can be heard and their ideas considered; the regional planning groups should have representation from each of the current school boards as well as municipal government representatives, in addition to administrators, other educators, parents and other citizens. While some may argue that this will make the regional groups too large, we believe that broad participation will enhance the work;
4. The process must allow sufficient time to develop and implement the plans;
5. There must be adequate public input throughout the process;
6. This committee should not predetermine a “magic number” of school administrative units. The number should grow out of the planning process and take into account both local and regional needs;
7. The resources of the Department of Education must be available to assist the planning groups in their work; and
8. The proposed plans must stand the test of local voter approval.

Applying these principles to the plans currently before this Committee, we believe that the Governor’s proposal fails each test.

- The projected savings in the Governor’s plan are not real; they are based on arbitrary and unsupported assumptions, and have failed to consider many off-setting costs.
- The process for developing the Governor’s proposal has been deeply flawed. The proposal was developed by a handful of people with no stakeholder input. It has badly strained the levels of trust between the Department and Maine’s school officials; this is exactly the way not to do things;
- The time frames in the Governor’s proposal has been too short to develop a sound plan or to provide for an appropriate transition;

- The plan is unfair to long-term school employees whose jobs will be terminated with no severance;
- The Governor is asking you to eliminate all of Maine's existing units of school governance with no opportunity for a local vote at the community level.

Please take this unsound proposal off the table.

With respect to the other plans which are before you, we believe that many contain ideas that could form the basis for a constructive, data driven and responsible process to achieve greater efficiencies in the delivery of educational services. We believe that regional groups to develop plans for cooperation, regional provision of services, and educationally appropriate school consolidation are a good idea. We believe that such planning groups could develop proposals and submit them to local voters on a timetable that would demonstrate that the Legislature is serious about addressing the concerns which were raised by the Palesky and TABOR initiatives.

We believe we can help to solve these problems if only we are asked to come to the table to assist in the development of options that can be made available to our local school systems and communities. And that is where we now need to start. Maine people, their elected school boards, superintendents, other school personnel, and municipal officials have the capacity, experience and skill to develop sound plans that local voters will consider and approve. MSBA urges you to look at all of the bills before you, at the relevant reports available to you, and then to craft new legislation that honors our diversity, geography, history and future needs so that whatever is finally put forward has broad public support and represents sound public policy.

MSBA would welcome the opportunity to work with this committee and the other interested parties to help inform your deliberations and assist with the next steps in this process.