

New School Plan Must Balance, Not Silence, Voices

Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr.

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Representative Jackie Norton captured the essence of the school centralization debate best in a recent *BDN* article (2/19/07). “She said the real battle will not be over the number of administrative units, but will be how those units are governed”, Mal Leary’s report stated. He quoted Norton: “Citizens of the state need to be somewhat comfortable about whether or not their voices are being heard.”

My research continues to show that administrative consolidation will not lead to substantial savings. The national research literature on school and district size continues to plainly state that *sometimes* savings result from consolidating *some types and sizes* of district, but they rarely result from pushing all schools and communities into a single type and size. In our own case, per pupil expenditures in SAD’s were higher than in School Unions 15 years following the full implementation of Maine’s Sinclair Act.

It’s time to insist that the governance debate be not only about costs but also about the *quality of learning for Maine’s children*. A solution that saves money but undercuts educational quality is not a solution at all.

The education literature is very clear about the conditions necessary for *all* children to learn (not just the children of the college-educated): talented, committed and creative teachers; parents who are engaged in their children’s learning from an early age; a school and school district that demand high performance and support it through talented leadership; a community and state that value education by expecting a lot and providing sufficient and equitable resources to every school. Teachers. Parents. Leadership. Expectations and Resources.

How will the school reorganization bill that emerges from Augusta ensure that Maine’s schools have great teachers, engaged parents, talented leaders, and equitable resources? As Representative Norton said, it all depends on how that bill rearranges who has the power and over what.

The Department of Education and the Governor’s Office, often at the urging of business leaders, have exerted unprecedented power over education policy and education practice in the past 20 years. Now, several proposals urge the end of town, city, and district school committees, arguing that more centralized “control and management of schools” is essential for “cost-savings”. But is it essential for high-quality learning for Maine’s kids? Is it even wise?

I think not. Michael Fullan, a recent consultant employed to study Maine’s system by MDOE, says of the state’s recent efforts at control and management: “...education reform in Maine has stalled through an overemphasis on standards and assessment – it is now time to reflect, refocus and recommit, with a sharper emphasis on teaching and learning and on lateral capacity building across the State (2006, p. 24). I and many others agree with Fullan’s conclusion: it’s time we invest in *lateral capacity*; that is, Teacher to Teacher, Parent to Teacher, School to School, School to Community.

What will a bill look like that will do this? It will spell out very clearly the responsibilities and the authority of the key players to bring them together in a new “lateral” partnership as follows:

1. Parents hold the first responsibility for the education of their children. Their voices and their authority must be protected, both directly and through accessible representatives, so *their needs, their values, and their responsibilities have a central place in the learning and upbringing of their children*.
2. Teachers hold the second responsibility. They must have the authority and the autonomy to use their talents and creativity in the service of the children they teach – mainly over *how to plan, deliver, and assess instruction* to meet the needs of all children.
3. School and district leaders hold the third responsibility. They must have the authority and autonomy to *develop the conditions in schools* that will support teachers and parents in their work with children

through planning, learning, supervising, and allocating resources.

4. School boards and school committees hold the fourth responsibility. They must have the authority to *establish goals and expectations* that reflect the needs and values of the communities they represent and to *raise the funds* those communities agree to invest in their schools.
5. The State holds the fifth responsibility. It must have the authority to make resources available to *ensure an equitable opportunity to learn* for every Maine child and that each taxpayer in Maine *pays an equitable share* of those resources.

The promise of free, universal education depends on *hearing all of these voices*. Any new district structure that alters the vital balance among them must describe clearly, to all constituents, how the new balance of power and responsibility will benefit children and not unreasonably burden taxpayers. Especially one that invents a wholly new regional layer of centralized power.