

Bold or Blind?

Update on the State's Plan to Centralize School Control

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At this juncture, with the Appropriations Committee taking their turn at “finding efficiencies” in Maine’s K-12 public school system, some of the questions posed by the public in January still go unanswered. The Education Committee hearings brought fresh ideas into the mix and resulted in a more deliberate and informed process than the Administration proposes. These steps toward making a “blind” proposal more transparent and well-supported by evidence will hopefully continue under the watchful eye of Appropriations.

School consolidation as proposed by the Administration and others in January resembles in many respects “old-fashioned consolidation” from the 1920s and 1950s. Maine children, families, and communities deserve better than this kind of “bold-fashioned” thinking for the 21st century.

1. Have we adequately identified the sources and location of “inefficiencies”?

No.

MDOE has not revealed a detailed cost-analysis demonstrating how some expenditures are unnecessary to the success of schools, and specifying which districts are “more harmed” by them and which are “less harmed”. The public has repeatedly asked for this analysis.

2. Have MDOE/The Governor proposed carefully designed models for new school district organization and functions that demonstrate cost-savings?

No.

The argument for saving rests solely on a comparison of average expenditures for different sized districts. It is a well-known fallacy to say, “Let’s make all the units in THIS (small district) category look like all the units in THAT (larger district) category and, voila!, they will cost less!” Different averages do not CAUSE different practices!

Most consolidation research is inconclusive because researchers and policy-makers have failed to remember how different communities and regions are. A 2006 study for the Pennsylvania General Assembly (Yan) found that savings were greater in the consolidation of certain types of district and were non-existent in the consolidation of other types. (Note: bringing many different types of districts together into a “county-wide” district showed the fewest savings).

Proponents of centralization must be required to demonstrate how more centralized districts with less citizen participation deliver higher quality education at a more reasonable cost.

3. Will substantial savings accrue from centralizing superintendent office functions into larger districts?

Probably not.

Maine currently devotes on average 9% of its K-12 expenditures to administration. The national average is 11%.

MDOE/Governor's calculations do not consider *non-instructional staff who are not strictly labeled as administrators* (superintendents or principals). Maine spends well below national averages on these positions and services – clerical positions, curriculum and professional development positions, business office personnel, guidance and other specialized student support. Larger districts in Maine employ more of these non-instructional/non-administrative personnel, as will the “new” larger districts of the future.

4. Do the current proposals adequately seek savings in “instruction and instruction-related” accounts?

No.

If the Governor and Department truly want to “re-size” Maine education budgets to the current realities, the largest expenditure category – and the one where Maine outspends the nation consistently – is “instruction and instruction-related”. Declining enrollments drive up these personnel costs. Why is nobody proposing greater efficiencies here by looking at ed techs and positions with teaching loads of very few students?

5. Have proponents explained specifically how Maine can “squeeze more blood out of this turnip” in relation to its neighbors in New England and New York?

No.

Maine and New Hampshire consistently show up at the bottom in most expenditure categories – including administration and non-instructional personnel -- in seven-state comparisons. Our prices and costs are pegged to those in the Northeast Region. This factor has not been consistently considered in calculations.

6. If MDOE/The Governor know that savings will result from more centralized districts, why is there a need for “incentives”?

There isn't. If savings are to be had, local citizens starved for tax reform will embrace these changes. The savings themselves will incentive enough!

As I note above, the administration has failed to clearly identify what the “inefficiencies” are and to

propose models for rectifying them. If this information were available and the savings were clearly demonstrated, local citizens, educators, school boards, and town meetings would pursue them.

If that MDOE has this information, the most cost-effective strategy for finding efficiencies is to share it directly with those districts and towns that clearly are “inefficient”. Provide planning support for them. Help them to realize greater efficiencies rather than forcing all districts into wholesale re-shuffling, wasting pressure time and energy in the process.

7. Have proponents identified and addressed the sources of administrative/personnel growth?

No.

Historical data demonstrate that administrative expenditures rose steeply: a) following the implementation of the Sinclair Act and the formation of larger districts with less direct local accountability; and c) as the number of state and federal mandates multiplied and piled on top of one another beginning in 1975 and accelerating in the mid-1990s. Most districts have additional non-instructional personnel directly as a result of these changes.

Centralization breeds easily-mandated “solutions”. The past 35 years proves that. But it doesn’t help implement these “solutions” in local schools and homes. Instead – and particularly if these mandates are not funded, as is the case with NCLB and the Maine Learning Results – the “solutions” pile up like so much cultch at a landfill. And efficiency deteriorates.

This is why local Mainers – including many citizens and educators – cannot trust the Administration’s new “solutions” until they are shown clearly and carefully how they will help teachers, parents, and children carry out their responsibilities better.