

School Unions in Maine: A Viable Alternative

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Recent proposals to find education efficiencies through administrative centralization have included an outright ban on one form of school district, the School Union. What are School Unions and are they deserving of such recommendations?

School Unions were Maine's first form of administrative consolidation. By requiring every community to be part of a School Union in 1917, the Maine legislature achieved a long-sought-after goal: to ensure that every community would be served by a paid superintendent of schools. School Unions, however, did not require consolidation of services, merely what we today would call collaboration for central office functions.

Today, Maine has 34 School Unions serving 131 towns (by comparison, 269 towns are served by SADs). Most are located in rural parts of the state. In brief, School Unions:

- Provide a superintendent and other administrative and instructional services to the school boards and schools of the towns within them;
- Provide direct supervision and management for primary and elementary education and administrative services to contract for secondary education.
- In a number of cases, the superintendent also serves as the superintendent for a Community School District which runs the secondary school serving the same communities.
- Offer direct taxpayer oversight of educational programs and budgets through the Town Meeting system.
- Permit school choice at the secondary level.

A cost analysis that compared 2005-06 expenditures in the 12 School Unions in Hancock and Washington Counties with 16 like SAD's* revealed the following:

1. The variations among all 28 districts showed that School Unions *can be* more economical than SADs.
2. All the predominantly rural districts studied – SADs and Unions alike -- spent more than the state average per-pupil expenditure except for SADs enrolling between 700 and 1600 students. (The range of enrollments ran from 400 to 2200.)
3. If the School Union and SAD expenditures are averaged and then compared,
 1. Average per-pupil expenditures for all costs were in general higher in the School Unions than in SADs.
 2. Average per-pupil costs for “regular instruction”, for “system” administration, for “school” administration, and for transportation were in general higher in School Unions than in SADs.
 3. Average per-pupil costs for “student and staff support”, for “career and technical education”, and for debt service were in general higher in SADs than in School Unions.
 4. Comparing the percentages of expenditures devoted to different functions,
 1. School Unions spent a higher percentage of their budgets than SADs for regular instruction, for system administration, and for transportation but the same percentage for school administration and facilities management.
 2. SADs spent a higher percentage than Unions for student and staff support, special education, and debt service.

No data are available for a comparison of student performance in these 28 units at this point. Some schools in School Unions, though, have been classified “high-performing” in the research leading up to EPS. Further, analyses of MEA scores that control for socioeconomic status do not demonstrate any learning advantage by type of district.

In short, the School Union district structure in Maine has provided a system of minimal coordination among towns. To the contrary, Unions have preserved a system of community and school autonomy that has permitted a high level of participation and ownership in elementary education in the communities served. Some have argued, with considerable evidence to support them, that the persistence of these schools has underwritten the survival of their communities.

On the basis of this comparison of district types, schooling tends to cost more in schools within the 12 School Unions studied than in the 16 similarly-sized SADs studied. It is also true, however, that the *variations* in cost patterns were so great that it is *unlikely that the district type is the cause* of higher or lower spending patterns.

Since national research demonstrates the educational advantages of smaller school units that are supported by community and parent involvement, terminating such units in Maine cannot be justified until strong evidence exists that a better system is available. No such evidence exists at this juncture.

Rather than terminate the School Union option and with it direct voter participation in 131 Maine communities, it makes more sense to assist SADs, CSDs, and School Unions alike to provide the best education at the most reasonable price. Indeed, some School Unions appear to be doing that already.

* Rural with enrollment ranges between 400 and 2200