

# Easton uniting against Baldacci school plan

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EASTON — Local residents are not happy about school consolidation and they're letting everyone know about it.

For the second time in two weeks, about 100 people gathered at the Easton Junior/Senior High School gymnasium to talk about the "proposed legislation for forced school consolidation," Superintendent Frank Keenan said on Monday night.

The school administrative reorganization plan, as proposed by the Appropriations Subcommittee, would limit the number of administrative units in the state to 80; right now, it's 290. State officials believe the move will save \$36.5 million, create transparency

in budgeting, and result in better academic programs.

Easton officials, however, believe the legislation won't create the savings projected, will take away local control, and ultimately will result in the closing of Easton's two schools.

Since their first meeting two weeks ago, locals have done everything they can to kill the proposal, including writing letters, signing petitions and calling legislators. Similar efforts are under way in Mars Hill, another small school unit in central Aroostook County.

On Monday night, Easton resi-

dents received an update on the situation and were urged by local officials to redouble their protest efforts.

"We've been very pleased with the turnout," Mike Corey, chairman of the Easton Board of Selectmen, said on Monday night. "There's a lot of energy by people in town to stand up for what they believe in, and that's to fight for a school that most of us have gone to and benefited from."

During the meeting, Keenan focused on two main issues: savings in the proposal and the loss of local control.

Based on the administrative positions needed in each of the 80 regional school units, Keenan estimated savings of \$13 million in salaries and benefits, but about \$12 million in new costs.

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The state expects to save about \$20 million in administrative costs based on its models.

When it comes to local control, Keenan also disagrees with the plan. It calls for a single governing board — locals are calling them "super boards" — to oversee each of the 80 regional school units. According to the Department of Education Web site, legislators are proposing three methods for determining representation on the boards.

- One that allows for at least one representative from every municipality in the district.
- One that allows for at least one representative from each subdistrict of the region.
- One that allows for at-large representation.

Keenan told residents, howev-

er, that if the proposal is approved, Easton could end up with one seat on a 15-member board. He said that would remove Easton's local control and likely result in the closing of the smallest schools, such as Easton, first.

He urged the crowd to send more cards and letters and make more calls to Augusta voicing opposition to the proposal as it stands.

And, after the meeting, residents said that's exactly what they planned to do.

Esther Richardson, a grandmother and a teacher in Easton, said she was getting involved because she was so frustrated with the process.

"I'm really angered by the way legislators are treating the

voters, trying to push this through without letting it go to us first," she said.

Easton resident Ashley Hill, 23, said the town will see a lot of changes for the worse if the proposal passes.

"I am going to be calling and I am going to be writing," she said. "I'm trying to get this information to my friends down state because they're misinformed."

Other residents were planning different tactics. Just before the meeting ended, an audience member mentioned that Gov. John Baldacci would be paying a visit to the J.M. Huber plant in Easton on Wednesday.

Her question: "Should we picket?"