

## The Sinclair Act: An Uncertain Legacy

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The Sinclair Act, Maine's most recent consolidation experience, is often summoned up in the current effort to centralize schooling as proof that consolidation works. It played a prominent part in the Maine Children's Alliance report. The Governor and Members of the State Board of Education have claimed that Maine children and the state itself are better off because of Sinclair. But does evidence support these claims? The short answer is No. Nobody has carefully studied the impacts of the Sinclair Act to ascertain if it did what it promised: to "establish satisfactory programs" and to "achieve a greater uniformity of tax rates" and a "more effective use of public funds for public schools". The Act invited communities to form SAD's and to close their small high schools. If they did, new state funds would underwrite a "10% bonus" in state allocation and provide construction money on a sliding scale.

I have compared available education data in three time periods: 1940-1960, the Pre-Implementation Period; 1960-1970, the Implementation Decade, and 1970-1990, the Post-Implementation Period. Most of the consolidation of schools districts occurred during the 1960s so most of the impact from Sinclair would appear following 1970.

My comparisons reveal that:

1. Consolidation of schools was *well under way prior to* the passage of Sinclair, particularly at the elementary level. It was encouraged by the state but *carried out largely by local towns and districts* (who bore 75% of the cost of public education then).
2. Sinclair's greatest documentable impacts were:
  1. to *close town-centered secondary schools* largely in rural areas and *build regional secondary schools* with modern equipment in them (average h.s. size grew from 260 to 472 during the 1960s); and
  2. to *terminate town school boards* (by 56%) and discourage School Unions (a collaborative form of district administration) and to *form regional school districts* with regional school boards and regional administrative offices (serving 61% of municipalities by 1970).
3. Outcome measures: Maine schools *improved* their rates of enrollment, attendance, and cohort retention steadily *from 1940 into the 1960s*. *Following 1970*, growth in enrollment, attendance, and cohort retention *essentially stopped*. During the 1970s and '80s, enrollment in Maine private schools grew.
4. Financial investment in Maine's public schools *rose precipitously during the 1950s and 1960s* (64% and 61% growth in Per Pupil Expenditures in constant dollars, respectively).
5. *After 1970*, few new secondary schools or new SADs were formed. *Expenditures, however, continued to rise* (about 40% increases in Per Pupil Expenditure in the '70s and '80s) *as did* the number and cost of *administration*.
6. Maine's *Education Tax Effort* was *highest in 1950* (% of Total Property Value for K-12 Public Education). *Each decade until the '80s, Maine spent less of its wealth on public education*. ETE rebounded in the '90s but still stands below the 1950 level.
7. *Local communities paid a higher share of education costs* than the state until 1980 when new education spending, some the result of Sinclair, caught up with the local share.

So, what do these observations tell us?

- They show that much of Maine's school consolidation was locally initiated, implemented, and funded – not the result of state models or intervention.
- They show that Maine's communities and the state were increasing education spending well before Sinclair and that growth in spending continued well after Sinclair.
- They show that most of Maine's communities became part of SAD's and that most new state funding during the '60s and '70s underwrote SAD budgets and new high school construction
- They show that the average size of elementary and secondary schools rose from 1940 to 1970, then leveled off through 1990. More students were bused to more distant schools each decade.
- They show the numbers of full-time administrators and the costs for administration grew rapidly after Sinclair.

- They show that Maine schools were improving their ability to “keep kids in school through grade 12” well before Sinclair but that this improvement stopped following Sinclair’s implementation.
- They show that Maine’s investment of property wealth in K-12 schools declined from 1950 to 1990.

To my way of thinking, this picture does not support a ringing endorsement of the Sinclair Act. At a time when Maine’s communities, in partnership with the state, were embarked on a course of studied consolidation, Sinclair poured funds into high school consolidation and “incentivized” communities to cede their control over educational matters and budgets to regional school boards and administration. Once new high schools were built and 61% of communities had joined SADs, Maine’s success at getting kids to enroll and stay in school through graduation flatlined. And costs continued to rise.

This record, though limited by available documentation, does not support the claim that Sinclair improved “efficiency” – raised learning while containing costs. In fact, by the mid-‘80s, per pupil expenditures in SADs were higher than in School Unions.

Did Sinclair’s creation of SADs undercut accountability to citizens and parents? Did the larger and more distant schools and the growth of administration following Sinclair distance citizens from their schools? Clearly, some Maine families “voted with their feet” on the quality of available schools in the ‘70s and ‘80s, enrolling students in the growing numbers of small private schools. I cannot help but think that there are some lessons here for us in 2007.