

Regional School Unions, Union School Associations, Super Unions, MDI Plan

Many proposals have been brought forth to make less damaging the school district consolidation law enacted by Maine's Governor and Legislature. The latest I have seen is the "Senate Amendment" concept draft language of the end of last week entitled Regional School Unions. Prior to that, the Education Committee's minority report (Edgecomb, McFadden, Muse, version 2) description of Union School Associations. Both of these try to bring back some elements of the "MDI Plan" for the Mount Desert Island region, sometimes referred to as a Super-Union, that was supposedly agreed upon with, and then rejected by, the Commissioner of Education.

Very briefly, the MDI plan tries to keep local school boards in control of community K-8 schools while complying with the law that gives control of regional education to (yet to be formed) Regional School Units. While the MDI plan interprets the law in a way that saves some local control by locally elected school boards (arguably the most controversial issue created by the law), it does not solve the myriad of other problems with the law.

To repair the law requires an understanding of what harm it has done, which in turn, requires knowing how the educational system used to work. So here are three illustrative problems with the law that:

- Mandates a decrease in educational expenditures in certain categories while it drastically increases educational expenditures in other categories.

- Removes the governance structure of many school entities while replacing the governance structure for only some of the entities.

- Changes the relationship of public schools to private schools in a manner that creates an unworkable method for retaining private schools.

Repair of these problems requires knowing how individual contracts were negotiated within the various administrative structures that have now been eliminated; how schools throughout the state are governed and which ones are now without any legal governance structure; and how private schools that are approved to accept public funded students are able to do so in terms of their relationships to their local communities.

None of the plans identified above solve any of these problems throughout the state. Indeed, what may work in MDI (such as the MDI plan) does not and cannot work in all parts of the state. The Union School Association (USA) plan does not deal, at all, with adjoining communities that choose separately to be part of an Regional School Unit (RSU) and a USA in which their neighbor is to be a part. It is though providing more choices within the law will solve more problems without recognizing that at the same time more problems are created. (Perhaps the next legislative sessions could work on the fixes to the fixes to the fixes.... until we have a special law for each community.) The Regional School Union plan, which gives a series of suggested responsibilities to a Regional entity subject to the wishes of a local entity tries to provide a kind of optional roll-back to the pre-consolidation law without scrapping the law. It does not, however, provide any solution for, nor mechanism for solving, the above listed problems.

A "repair" of the law must provide a situation BETTER than repealing the law to get my attention away from collecting more signatures on the citizen initiated petition to repeal the school district consolidation law. I have yet to hear of one.

–Ralph Chapman rchapman@downeast.net
Brooksville 20080119