

REPAIR or REPEAL?

Can the school district consolidation law, part of the state budget enacted by Maine's Governor and Legislature last June, be repaired? Or must it be repealed?

At least we are no longer asking whether or not it is a good law since its blatant flaws are seen by an increasing number of people, especially those hard working volunteers that have been serving on Regional Planning Committees (RPCs) trying to comply with the law.

The goals of the school district consolidation law seemed to have been to reduce educational expenditures (and thereby reduce property taxes), retain educational quality in Maine's public K-12 schools, and improve the efficiency of delivering educational services. I say "seemed to have been" because several other motives appear in the manner and result of the enacted law: reduce public participation in education, concentrate power in non-elected bureaucrats, and increase the student / teacher ratio.

The most striking result is the massive tax increase that accompanies any practical formulation of the redistricting plan. The most far-reaching result is the elimination of 1800 publicly elected local officials. That the law, the most radical change in school administrative structure in more than half a century, was enacted without a public hearing or vote demonstrates the disdain that the Governor, his Department of Education, and the Legislature have for the citizens.

One way to insure efficiency in delivery of educational services is to allow those whose tax monies are being expended to have control over the school budget. That way, the citizens' interest in good education is balanced by their interest in lower property taxes. Their ability to defeat a school budget, even if only threatened, provides a powerful incentive for school boards and superintendents to form efficient budgets devoid of excess. Since this is the way it used to work, it is not surprising that public education has been the lowest cost form of education in the state. Private schools, even with the advantage of being able to decline providing services to all students, especially those for whom the cost is unusually high, still cannot provide equivalent education at lower cost. Since the new law removes the ability of local citizens to balance their interest between taxes and education, efficiency cannot be improved unless there is a more effective mechanism to discern the public will than democracy.

Finally, I have seen no reasonable suggestion that educational quality improvement will follow from the existing law.

So, in summary, any fix on the existing law that is better than repealing it will 1) provide taxpayer savings in reality; 2) will discern the public will better than democracy, and 3) will improve educational quality at lower expenditure rates than present.

Show me such a plan, I would welcome the opportunity to review it. In the meantime, there is no reason to let up on a repeal effort.

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