

When I look at the current state of the school district consolidation debacle, I wonder how we came to be so affluent that we can afford to waste our resources in this way. Hundreds of Maine citizens have invested thousands of hours of their time in an effort to comply with an ill-conceived, unexamined law that would not have passed on its own merits. The legislators who voted for it have been criticized for being out of touch and unresponsive to their constituents. Now the Education Committee, which ironically did not have a hand in its creation, has been tasked with patching it up so those good citizens can get back to work. The Committee has spent this past month discussing the application of randomly placed band-aids to a few of its acknowledged flaws, summarily dismissing others, and excepting Senator Mills' request to the contrary, denying the need to solicit input from those same people who have been wrestling with it. Meanwhile, those good citizens, for the most part, would not shed a tear of regret for the time they have already spent if this whole scheme were to go up in smoke. Many of them are standing by holding gasoline-soaked rags. One of these rags is a proposed amendment to allow towns to hold their vote now to opt out of consolidation, bypassing the prerequisite of constructing a plan and getting the Commissioner's approval.

An often repeated criticism heard from all levels of participants in this fiasco is its unrealistically aggressive timeframe, even assuming this law were functional. This past Friday, the Education Committee breezed through the list of school bill requests with alarming speed, including five proposals addressing delay, which they deemed to have already addressed. In Augusta's haste to avoid careful scrutiny and be done with this law, they promise to bequeath a correspondingly bigger mess of unknown problems upon the public. In the seven months subsequent to its emergency legislation, real impediments to implementation have surfaced, euphemistically identified as "unintended financial consequences" and in time, more will follow. For example, this month school boards begin their annual budget meetings, and many of them will discover that either they no longer qualify for the regular state subsidy for education, or even worse, they will lose it in a subsequent year. What this portends for many potential RSU's is that they will transition from being eligible to ineligible for state subsidy, and the results for these units will be dramatic cuts in state aid, arising as brand new "unintended financial consequences", and irremediable by law. If it passes, LD 1932, the touted "fix" for "unintended financial barriers", is a very small band-aid with inadequate adhesive. Taxpayers will be quick to note that while their school boards can hold their budgets to miniscule increases of a few percentage points, their town's share of education costs will still increase astronomically, and property taxes will jump to cover it.

Another factor in the timeframe discussion is that in three months over 38,000 signatures were collected on petitions to request the legislature to repeal this law or call for a public referendum. The additional required signatures will be obtained in short order, and in November 2009 the public will finally have the opportunity to voice its opinion. In the meantime, we need a moratorium to assess what has happened. No one disagrees with the concept of saving administrative costs of education, but there is no justification for creating new expenses and increasing property taxes to satisfy legislative whim or abdication of responsibility. Maine has a budget crisis, tax reform, and total economic viability at stake, which should be the priority of this legislature. School boards and school administrators need to return their focus to our students without delay. Let's not waste any more of our resources, and let's be practical. If the legislature lacks the courage to admit a mistake and repeal this law on its own, it owes it to the public to put it on hold until all its flaws can be identified, evaluated, and the people can have their input.

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