

MAINE COALITION TO SAVE SCHOOLS
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PRESS CONFERENCE
EMBARGOED UNTIL 11 AM
TUESDAY, JANUARY 29, 2008
VISITORS' CENTER, STATE HOUSE
AUGUSTA, ME.
CONTACT: SKIP GREENLAW

REPEAL EFFORT CONTINUES

Our citizen initiated effort to allow Maine voters the opportunity to repeal the school consolidation law will continue. Although we had hoped to gather enough signatures for the question to be considered in the current legislative session, that deadline has passed. We needed 55087 signatures to meet the state constitutional requirement. Currently, we have 38565 signatures in our possession.

After discussion and debate amongst ourselves, we came to the conclusion that it is prudent to continue to collect signatures and file the petition with the Secretary of State as soon as we collect 60000 signatures. This will give the voters the opportunity to decide the matter, though not as soon as we hoped. The risk we run by continuing now is that the legislature may change the law which might force us to file another petition and start collecting signatures anew. The volunteers understand that this is a possibility and are willing to take this risk. No deadline or amendment to the law is going to alter our resolve to see this law repealed.

The school consolidation law was presented to the citizens of Maine by Governor Baldacci and enacted into law by the legislature as a way to reduce central administrative costs. While consolidation may reduce some administrative costs, we all have come to the realization that there are NO NET COST SAVINGS. What we know from experience is that school consolidation, if not repealed, will result in the largest single increase in property taxes in the history of the State of Maine. We challenge the Governor and the Commissioner of Education to prove to Maine people that school consolidation will save the state or local taxpayers any money. Since there is NO NET COST SAVINGS and the promise of huge increases in property taxes, we do not understand why the legislature does not acknowledge the obvious, repeal this law, start over, and involve the public in the process of finding workable alternatives.

We offer a suggestion, which has the potential for significant cost savings, to the Governor and the legislature. In his state of the state address two weeks ago, Governor Baldacci alluded to an agreement that his administration had reached with members of the Maine Education Association regarding the purchase of prescription drugs. We think that the Governor ought to expand that concept. In a letter I delivered to the Governor's office this morning, the coalition has requested that the Governor convene a meeting of all public employee groups in the state which receive health care benefits from tax dollars to discuss and negotiate ways to reduce the cost of health insurance. The suggestion does not imply that public employees should be asked to receive

reduced health care benefits. In keeping with the Governor's stated interest in improving efficiency, it seems logical that he ought to be willing to talk with the various public employee groups in Maine to consolidate health care coverage into one plan that would realistically provide significant savings for taxpayers. We urge members of the public to write Governor Baldacci and members of the legislature and demand that they find ways to reduce the costs of health care coverage by consolidating public employee health care plans. Does anyone remember what the Maine Employees Mutual Insurance Company has done to stop the spiraling costs of workers' compensation premiums? Could the Governor and the legislature replicate that success? We think so.

Members of regional planning committees from all over the state have told me repeatedly that the work that they need to do to develop consolidation plans and obtain Department of Education approval will not happen so that these plans can be voted upon by local taxpayers in November 2008 as the law requires. In some instances, these committees believe that it is impossible under current law for them to develop rational, coherent plans for consideration by the public. Most planning committees believe that the plans will be defeated if they are ever brought to a vote. At some point, the legislature must come to terms with the reality that this law lacks any substantial public support.

Senator Peter Mills, a member of the legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs recently suggested to that committee that they request testimony from chairs of the regional planning committees and superintendents so that they will be able to hear first hand the experience of the people who are trying to implement this law. We endorse Senator Mills' suggestion. This morning I delivered a letter to members of the Education committee asking them to act upon Senator Mills' suggestion. We believe that the committee will hear a much different report about the progress of school consolidation than the Department of Education Commissioner, Susan Gendron, has painted for them.

I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to the more than two hundred volunteers for their dedicated work on behalf of our children. They are a cross section of what is so good about Maine people. These unsung heroes have interrupted their busy schedules and worked long and hard to collect thirty eight thousand signatures in just three months. These volunteers are members of the Republican, Democratic, and Green political parties of the State of Maine as well as people who have no party affiliation. Many of us have observed how remarkable it has been that there has been no bickering among us. We all share the same goal of trying to maintain educational excellence for our children. This effort has been a very special opportunity for those of us who have taken up the cause. We thank Maine people for listening to us and signing the petition.

Although we did not achieve our goal of obtaining sufficient signatures to have the legislature consider the repeal of the school consolidation law during the current session, we shall finish the job we started expeditiously. If a new legislature does not repeal this law in January 2009, then the people of the State of Maine will have the final say in November 2009.

If there are members of the public who are interested in collecting signatures, please contact Skip Greenlaw at 367-2738, 460-1260, or by e-mail skipg@hypernet.com.