

TOWN OF TRENTON
School District Consolidation
Frequently Asked Questions
September 2008

Why is Trenton joining a new school district?

In June 2007 the Maine Legislature passed a law to reorganize school districts in order to consolidate 290 into 80. Towns were allowed to choose their consolidation partners, and a very thorough study and deliberation of all the options resulted in the proposal before Trenton voters, which is for Trenton to join the Mount Desert Island Regional School System.

Who are the members of the proposed Mount Desert Island Regional School System?

The MDI Regional School System is composed of the towns of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor, Tremont, Cranberry Isles, Frenchboro, Swan's Island, and Trenton, plus MDI High School. Trenton is the new addition to this group which currently operates as Union 98. MDI High School is a separate member because it is legal entity on its own, created in 1963 by a legislative act, and has its own separate governing board comprised of members from the towns of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor and Tremont.

What are the schools in this proposed district?

Mount Desert Island High School plus eight K-8 schools: Connors-Emerson Elementary School in Bar Harbor, Mount Desert Elementary School in Northeast Harbor, Pemetic Elementary School in Southwest Harbor, Tremont Consolidated School, Islesford Elementary School, Frenchboro Elementary School, Swan's Island Elementary School, and Trenton Elementary School.

How was the decision made for Trenton to join planning with MDI?

The original recommendation of the Department of Education was for Trenton to join with the MDI towns. A six member Reorganization Planning Committee of Trenton volunteers representing our town's selectmen, school board, and community-at-large considered all of Trenton's options for consolidation partners, which included 25 of the 37 towns in Hancock County, plus one town in Washington County. Twelve months were spent attending meetings and studying data. The Trenton School Board made the final decision to request membership in the MDI Regional School System in June 2008, after the consolidation law was amended. Subsequently the MDI Reorganization Planning Committee voted to include Trenton, and each individual town's school board voted on the reorganization plan that was submitted to and approved by the Commissioner of Education. Now the public has the final say on accepting this plan when they vote on November 4, 2008.

What happens if any of the towns vote down the reorganization plan?

If a majority of voters in any of the four MDI towns of Bar Harbor, Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor, or Tremont vote against the reorganization plan, the plan will not go forward and the whole region will have to begin the reorganization discussions all over again. If the plan is approved by a majority of voters in each of these four towns, the plan will go forward for a system that includes at least these four towns along with any of the other towns in which a majority voted in favor of the plan. If a majority of voters in any of the towns of Cranberry Isles, Frenchboro, Swan's Island, or Trenton vote against the plan, then that town will be on its own to figure out how to administer its school in compliance with the reorganization law. The outer islands are entitled to an exemption under this law and they could contract with the central office for administrative services without incurring penalties, although their overall administrative costs would likely be higher. Trenton would also need to contract for administrative services, again, at a likely higher rate than we would pay as a member of the school system, and in addition Trenton would face financial penalties in the form of loss of some subsidy dollars from the state.

Who will own and govern the schools?

School ownership will remain as it is at present. Each elementary school will remain the property of its municipality. MDI High School will remain the property of its trustees. Every school will continue to be governed by the same school board that existed before the reorganization.

Who will employ the teachers and other staff?

All school personnel will continue to be employed exclusively by each local school.

Will there be any difference in school budgeting and finance?

The school budgets will be developed by local boards as they are now. Budgets will get reviewed by the same municipal warrant committees and will get approved at town meeting as they do now. However, the new central administration budget will have its own separate review and approval process. Also, for every school budget, the new law also requires an additional separate written budget validation referendum for at least the next three years.

Will our school be the same after reorganization?

In almost every aspect, Trenton Elementary School will continue to operate as it does at present. Our school will operate with its current same staff in the same building. The school board you have elected will continue to govern and maintain oversight of the school, just as it does now.

What changes would affect our school after reorganization?

Trenton would join the MDI towns and schools that currently comprise Union 98. We would share the same superintendent and the central office staff that provides administration of business functions, special education, and transportation. We would adopt the curriculum that Union 98 schools now use, as well as policies and a calendar that is consistent with theirs. Our plan provides details for the phase-in of consistent collective bargaining agreements.

Will Trenton have any voice or voting power in the management of the central office?

Yes. Each town will appoint members of its own school board to a regional board with responsibility to oversee the administration of the central office. Based on total population, Trenton will have three representatives on this regional board, as will Mount Desert, Southwest Harbor, and Tremont. Bar Harbor will have four, and the outer islands will each have one. MDI High School will not have separate representation on the regional board.

Does any of this result in educational benefits for our students?

Yes. Having a coordinated curriculum is critical to ensuring our students' education meets Maine's learning standards and that they are adequately prepared for high school. Furthermore, it benefits all students coming together at MDI High School to have their prior education as consistent as possible. Trenton is only in the beginning stages of developing this process, and so joining MDI's school system with their comprehensive and proven curriculum will give our students immediate access to greater educational opportunities. Historically the vast majority of Trenton's students have chosen to attend MDI High School and we have been part of this system on an informal basis for decades.

There are other benefits as well: there are opportunities for professional development which will directly benefit students, there is support for adding programs not currently offered, and overall there are the merits of joining this pre-established system identified as the gold standard by the Commissioner of Education.

Would Trenton's students have to attend MDI High School or do they still have a choice?

By law Trenton residents maintain their current options for school choice. Trenton will continue to tuition its students to MDI High School or to any other state-approved secondary school. The reorganization plan does not alter this arrangement in any way.

Will joining the MDI Regional School System cost more and how will Trenton's property taxes be affected?

It appears to be a fact of life that the cost of education is always increasing, and that factor is independent of consolidation. It is also evident that Maine's education subsidy formula discriminates against rural schools. Trenton will receive \$293,118 from the state this year with our taxpayers making up the difference to a budget of \$3,176,769. Any future loss of subsidy would result from application of the subsidy formula and increases in Trenton's valuation, and not as a result of consolidation.

You may have read news stories about how consolidation will cost more. Here is a detailed response to the areas of concern and how they affect Trenton:

Collective Bargaining Agreements

From the outset, unified collective bargaining agreements have been a major contention in school district consolidation. The state insists that there is a cost savings to negotiating one contract for all teachers and other employees within each new school district, but the fact is this will be an additional cost to towns like Trenton where the current pay scale lags behind those of their prospective consolidation partners. None of Trenton's options would have avoided this expense, and the fact is that even if the state were not mandating this, Trenton would be forced soon to increase its salary scales by market pressure. However, along with the many advantages of electing the alternative organizational structure allowed by the amended law is the ability to phase in these increases. We expect that the first additional expenses will take effect in the school year 2012-2013, after our current teachers' contract period expires, and that the final phase will occur by 2014-2015.

While future payroll costs will increase, there will be some offset in the overall budget due to the fact that the outstanding debt on the school addition will be paid in its entirety by 2015.

Central Office Administration

From the perspective of the MDI towns, some modest expenses in enlarging the central office administration to accommodate the addition of Trenton will be offset by corresponding efficiencies of scale in operations. From Trenton's viewpoint, our share of this cost will actually be less than our current expenses for these same services.

High School Tuition

Trenton currently pays a tuition rate for its high school students based on a rate set by the state, and consolidation will not change this formula. In the recent past this rate has increased annually by approximately 6%.

Curriculum

The MDI is on a 5-year curriculum cycle where a specific subject area has the year of focus. After review and realignment with the learning results, each school purchases materials to augment the curriculum that is targeted that year. When Trenton officially joins this system we will enter the cycle in its current year. Our annual Trenton school budget has always provided for the purchase of educational materials and will continue to in comparable amounts that will cover the purchases directed by the coordinated curriculum review cycle.

Cost shifting

This refers to the effect of consolidation on forcing some municipalities to pay part of the cost of education of other municipalities in their new school units. The MDI Regional

School System will receive one subsidy check from the state, but the allocation will be made based on each school's rightful share under pre-consolidation guidelines.

Are there any future cost savings anticipated?

The MDI Regional School System is committed to making education a priority. That does not preclude finding ways to achieve financial savings, and as we move together in our educational goals these opportunities will be fully investigated. The plan represents a natural evolution toward efficient administrative cooperation while retaining all the real and essential qualities of community involvement and local oversight.

Another consideration is that we expect our elementary school to achieve the gold standard currently set by MDI schools, at which point Trenton will have even more to offer potential residents with families. Theoretically, that could increase the population, the tax base, and benefit all of Trenton's taxpayers.

Can the MDI Regional School System close our school?

No. Only the Town of Trenton can make this decision, and it would be subject to voter approval.

There is so much negative press about consolidation. Why does this sound like it will work to Trenton's favor?

The original law passed in June 2007 required school districts to consolidate in a way that would eliminate local control, town ownership of school property, and allow a regional board to close schools. MDI school board members lobbied hard for and won legislation this year that allows their towns to maintain control of their schools, and basically maintain their association with each other status quo. In the process the Governor and the Commissioner of Education were convinced that their current system met the requirements of the objectives of the reorganization law, and they in fact became a model for a newly recognized form of school system now termed the alternative organization structure. The amended law also had the effect of mitigating factors that would have been financial burdens to Trenton joining MDI under the original law. What is now possible is for Trenton to formalize the relationship it has long had with the MDI school system, and while this opportunity appears to present significant educational benefits to Trenton, it is also expected that the ongoing relationship amongst the participants will benefit all of the members of this school system.

What are the next steps in the reorganization process?

On Election Day, November 4, 2008, the voters of all the prospective member towns will be asked to approve the reorganization plan. Subject to its approval, plans for the transition will begin immediately and the effective date will be July 1, 2009, the beginning of the next fiscal year.

What is the reorganization plan and how was it developed?

The plan was built by the MDI Reorganization Planning Committee and its legal counsel. Each school board had to approve the plan before it was submitted to the Commissioner of Education, and she has approved the plan as ready to be put forth to the voters.

The plan outlines how the MDI Regional School System will comply with the requirements of consolidation law. It also incorporates another document called the inter-local agreement, which defines the duties of the central office and the powers and duties of the board that will govern it.

Copies of the plan are available for review at the Trenton Town Office, Trenton Elementary School, and at the information meetings, as well as at http://mdischools.net/MDI_RSS_Reorganization_Plan.pdf and http://mdischools.net/20080825_MDI_RSS_Interlocal_Agreement_clarified.htm.