

Getting Our Facts Straight to
Make Maine's Schools Better

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The air and the papers are thick with claims, suggestions, and proposals to save money by centralizing and consolidating school districts. I have assembled the following "fact-checker" with the hope that decisions will be informed and well-reasoned. Please share this document with others.

1. Claim: Maine spends too much on K-12 education.

Facts:

- ❖ We do spend more per pupil than the national average.
- ❖ Our spending ranks 6th out of 7, however, within our economic region (New England and New York).
- ❖ The state's share of education revenues in 2002-3 (latest year available from USDOE) shows:
 - Maine's state share at 42.9%
 - The US average state share at 48.7%
 - Vermont's state share at 67.8%
 - New Hampshire's state share at 48.9%
- ❖ State government's expenditures on PreK-12 education, as reported in the state's "Single-Audit Report", was 24% of state government revenues in 2003 – nowhere near the current claims that education spending is "near 50%" of the state's budget.
- ❖ Maine now spends a *lower proportion of the state's total valuation* on K-12 education than it did in 1950, 1960, or 1970. This Education Tax Effort declined every decade from 1950 to 1990.

2. Claim: Maine spends too much on educational administration

Facts: According to the latest figures from the U.S. Department of Education, Maine spent:

- ❖ \$65 per pupil more than the national average for administration and
- ❖ \$290 per pupil less than the national average for other staff and services in support of teachers and students or
- ❖ \$225 less than on support staff categories altogether.

3. Claim: Maine has 300 school districts – too many!

Fact:

- ❖ Maine has 154 separate school administrative offices that serve as “central offices” for functional districts (47 municipal units, 33 School Unions, 73 SAD’s, 1 State Agency, and 14 CSD’s that overlap other units).
- ❖ Some small districts have only part-time offices and superintendents.

4. Claim: Reducing the number of these “central offices” and reconstituting new larger administrative structures will yield substantial savings.

Facts:

- ❖ The research demonstrates that consolidating some types of districts can save and shows that consolidating other types does not save. A one-size-fits-all approach is not recommended by any reliable, well-informed source.

Facts from our own experience with district consolidation:

- ❖ Reorganization and restructuring of businesses and public agencies requires an infusion of transition funds. Maine’s last consolidation (following the Sinclair Act in 1957):
 - carried a permanent “10% bonus” in state allocations to new SAD’s and
 - substantial new funding to underwrite new construction.
 - Spending on K-12 education increased 126% during the 1960s (in constant dollars).
- ❖ In 1980 – 10 years after the major implementation of Sinclair – the state average Per Pupil Expenditure was 121% higher than in 1960. (in constant dollars)
- ❖ The Per Pupil Expenditure for Administration for our new district system was 373% higher. (in constant dollars)
- ❖ In 1984-85, the Per Pupil Expenditure of all 61 of the state’s SAD’s ranked in the top half of all school units (average rank: 73.2 of 259, with 1 representing the highest PPE).
- ❖ The average rank of Per Pupil Expenditures in School Unions was 167.3.

5. Claim: Centralizing the control and management of schools will improve schools, including correcting the “downward trend” in Maine student achievement scores

Facts:

- ❖ National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for Maine students are not in decline relative to national performance trends. Nevertheless, Maine student achievement scores, as with scores everywhere, must be improved.

- ❖ Research does not demonstrate that centralizing control and management over schools enhances quality. In fact, authorities including Michael Fullan, Linda Darling-Hammond, Richard Elmore, Theodore Sizer, and Herbert Walberg find that school performance is enhanced by *schools, not by school districts*.
- ❖ Schools that perform well, these authorities say, have high standards for performance, energetic support for teachers and parents working together, strong professional knowledge and skills, instructional leadership, and adequate resources.
- ❖ They also say these schools need high expectations, savvy educational leaders, and minimal management regulation from school districts. Over-centralization has obstructed high performance in schools. Reforms that focus on improving student learning break down larger districts into smaller more responsive units (see: the English national system and large city districts in the U.S. like Chicago, Boston, and New York).

6. Claim: Town meetings, city councils, school boards, parents, educators and administrators have squandered the opportunity for cost-cutting so it must be done by “bold” action in Augusta.

Facts:

- ❖ Every school budget in Maine is scrutinized every year by community taxpayers – most thoroughly in School Unions and municipal districts. Who better to decide such important matters than those who enjoy “taxation WITH representation”?
- ❖ Under the state’s new funding system (LD1/EPS), \$50,000,000 more state dollars have been allocated to the state’s 1/3 wealthiest communities, according to Senator John Nutting’s analysis of MDOE records.
- ❖ These funds were not available to the 1/3 poorest communities – also the communities with lower test scores and needier schools.

Concluding Comment:

It is time that all Mainers who care about the future, our children, and the quality of our schools stand together. Education starts at home. Our schools, with the assistance of parents, amplify and extend learning, one student at a time. They need a legislature and state executives who expect the best, support the best, and “know when to get out of the way”.

Great kids and families deserve great schools. It takes communities, a cadre of skilled professional educators, and wise state leadership *together* to deliver.