A CASE *for* COOPERATION

Making Connections
to Improve Education
For All Maine Students

Maine Children's Alliance

Publishing a report on public education is a new venture for the Maine Children's Alliance. We are convinced that change is needed in the way Maine serves its students, from pre-school to high school, with the aim of improving the lives of all our young people.

Maine citizens have long been strong supporters of public schools, but the state and its local communities can do a better job of translating that support into improved educational services.

This report contains numerous ideas and suggestions for getting started. It explains why we should act, and how we can act effectively.

Through many years of publishing the Maine Kids Count Data Book, we have learned that where we have good data, we can make sound policy decisions that change the lives of our kids for the better. *A Case for Cooperation* makes use of the data to point the way toward better policy in public education.

We welcome discussion of this report and the larger topic of what's best for children's education. If we can have a statewide dialogue, in every community around the state, then we will be well on our way to achieving this goal.

ELINOR GOLDBERG
President/CEO

Education Project Advisory Board

Introduction

Reports on public education are frequent and often well read. We invest a great deal of our hopes for the future in how our children are schooled, and how they will be prepared for the challenges of life in this new century.

This report concentrates on the subject of regional services for K-12 schools, something often talked about but more rarely achieved in Maine. Beginning with the now-historic Sinclair Act, it traces the uncertain progress of regional cooperation in a state with a strong tradition of local communities, and an equally strong tradition of neighbors helping each other. It finds that Maine has had effective models for cooperation in the past, but that the process of implementing them has been incomplete and has now fallen into disuse. The state must reinvent these tools to respond to a different educational environment, one where enrollment is shrinking rather than growing, even while expectations for learning and achievement continue to increase.

With recent major changes in state policy concerning taxation and school financing, it is clearly an optimal moment to revive discussion of how Maine and its diverse communities structure and organize their efforts to educate children, and how they can best be equipped for success in careers and in life.

The report finds that the state must play a greater role in setting policy that will encourage, but not coerce, schools and communities all over Maine to rethink how they approach basic educational questions.

It examines voluntary progress toward regional cooperation, and shows how the state can support and enhance such efforts.

It suggests that Maine convene an ambitious planning effort to bring educators, local officials, and citizens together to start from the ground up in creating a new vision for education in their region.

And it offers recommendations on what all the major stakeholders should do.

No report can replace the hard work that will be necessary to create public schools we can all be proud of, help fuel a knowledge economy, and create generations of well-educated citizens confident of their place in the world. Yet it is essential to begin.

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Graphic Design: Sharon Pieniak, www.bluecatmedia.com

Chapter 1

The Need for Change

Maine's public schools face the formidable challenge of rising expectations. The state's transition from an industrial economy to one based on information and knowledge, like the earlier shift from farming to factories, has profound implications for how students learn and what they are expected to know.

What sufficed in the 1950s, or even the 1980s, is no longer adequate to prepare students for the world of higher education and the careers that lie beyond. While Maine's public schools, grades K-12, continue to show considerable strengths, there are signs of a slowdown in academic achievement.

Student performance in the National Assessment of Educational Performance, while significantly above national norms, has stayed roughly the same over the last 10 years. And, in a different measurement, the Maine Educational Assessment tests show fewer than half of all students even partially meet standards required for the Maine Learning Results, with no appreciable improvement in recent years. In many instances, students are still falling short of the standards the public expects them to meet, in turn jeopardizing both future success for students themselves, and the economy they will be building as the 21st century unfolds.

Even the current levels of school achievement are threatened by two important factors that could make things more difficult for educators and students in the years just ahead. The two concerns involve taxes and school enrollment.

Tax Anxiety

Maine is experiencing an unprecedented sensitivity to levels of state and local taxes, focusing on the state's high overall tax burden and high property taxes. Unlike the 1950s and 1960s, when citizens were willing to pay new and higher taxes to improve education and other public services, few now suggest that the needs of today's students justify higher levels of taxation.

So far, voters have considered two referendum questions mandating lower property taxes, and will vote on another that would limit spending on education and other state and local services in November. Although voters turned down a question that would have slashed local property tax collections by 40 percent, they approved Question 1 in 2004, which requires the state to meet its 1984 pledge of 55 percent state support for General Purpose Aid to education.

In the short run, the success of Question 1 would seem to be a boon for K-12 education. The state increased GPA by $83 million for the 2005-2006 school year, to $836 million, and is expected to increase assistance over each of the next three years, until the state is paying a majority of the bill for K-12 education, currently $1.8 billion annually. (The state also contributes more than $150 million annually for retired teacher pensions and health care, an amount not included under the GPA calculation.)

The strain of providing more aid for education is already evident. Budget increases for the university system and the community colleges have lagged behind inflation for the past three years, and in the case of the community colleges, state support per student has actually fallen. This is because dramatic increases in community college attendance – a long-time state goal – have not been matched by corresponding increases in state subsidy. Vital as K-12 schools are, increasing support for one element in the public educational system while reducing aid to other vital links is not a formula for long-term success.

In the long run, even Question 1 does not deal with a major cost-driver for high property taxes – school costs per pupil that are much higher than the national average, currently ranking 8th among the 50 states, even though Maine is only 32nd in median personal income.[1]

Replacing local dollars with state dollars to support schools may provide some short-term property tax relief, but it does nothing to lower the overall state and local tax burden. Left unchecked, this situation could increase the temptation to vote for referendums limiting taxes and spending, some of which could devastate financial support for public schools.

Enrollment crunch

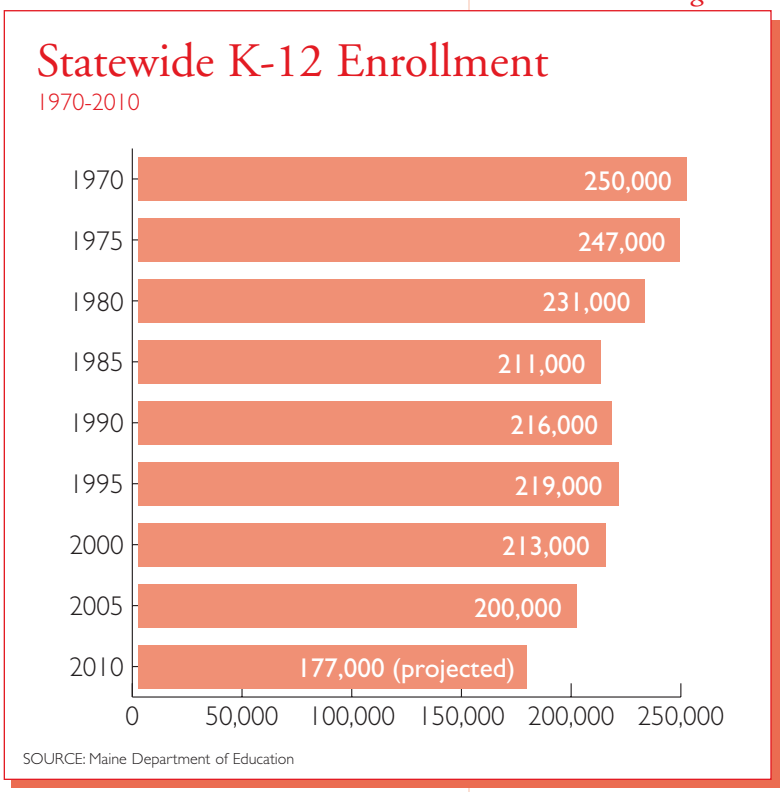
The second major factor that could threaten support for public schools is declining enrollment. Maine now has 20 percent fewer students through grade 12 than it did at its peak enrollment in 1970, the end of the "baby boom" years. From 250,000 students statewide, enrollment has declined to just over 200,000, and is expected to continue to drop over the next 10 years, until just 177,000 students attend classes in their first 13 years of education.[2]

Because Maine's population has been increasing, although slowly, the public is largely unaware of the serious and continuing decline in school enrollment, which is a clear result of the aging of the state's population. Maine now has a median age above 40, the highest in the country. This demographic fact has received plenty of attention where it concerns the rising need for health care, but not at the opposite end of the demographic spectrum – the small, and declining, number of families with school-aged children.

Enrollment declines are most apparent in rural districts in northern and eastern counties, but they will soon extend statewide. Every county in Maine is expected to have fewer students during the next 10 years, even though a few districts may continue to grow. While it is possible that Maine's demographic may begin to turn around – that more families with young children will move here – this is not something the state can, or should, count on.

There are reasons why the enrollment decline has not garnered more public attention. One is the baby boom "echo," the children of the original baby boom generation, which marginally increased enrollments during the decade from 1985-95. But both the baby

Figure 1



boom and its echo have now passed, and enrollments have begun dropping by 1 percent or more per year.

The enrollment drop has obvious and alarming potential to increase Maine's already high per pupil costs, making it all the more likely that appropriations for schools will meet growing taxpayer resistance, regardless of which level of government is paying the bill.

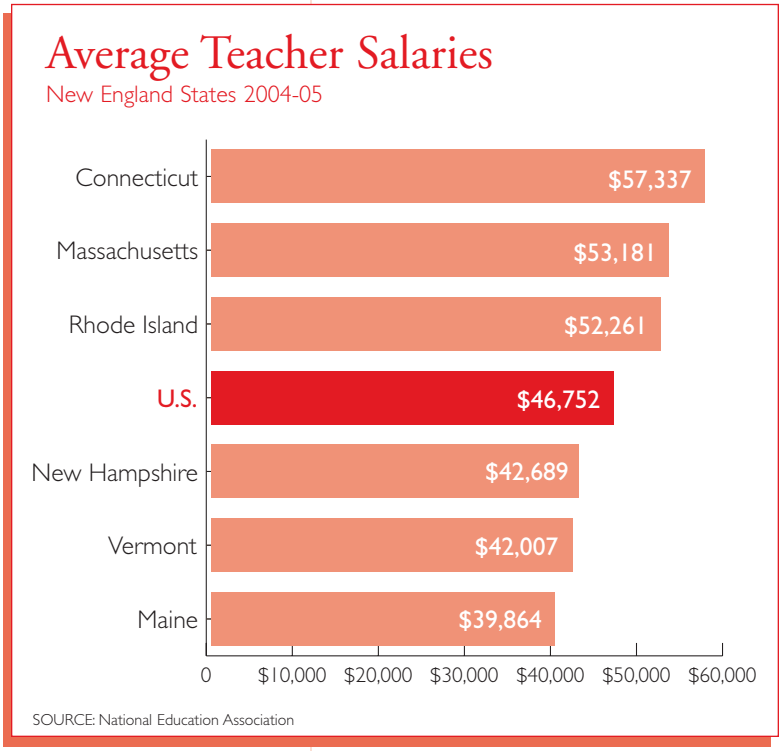
New Educational Needs

At the same time, there is no sign that the public has lessened demands for a first-rate educational system. The links between higher education, good jobs, and new industries is well documented and by now firmly established in the public mind. The drive for increased research and development funding, new baccalaureate and graduate degrees, and on-line and specialized programs is an important, even central, aspect of economic development strategies.

At the other end of the student spectrum, the need for early childhood education has never been clearer. The reality that dollars spent on pre-school nutrition and education are repaid more than seven times over is supported by research on early childhood learning.[3] Maine has been a pioneer in half-day and now all-day kindergarten programs, and many public schools are now enrolling pre-kindergarten children as well. Identifying learning disabilities early, attending to special needs, and making sure all children are ready to learn are not only laudable goals. They are proven strategies for increasing achievement throughout a child's school and college years.

Trying to supply these educational services without increased tax rates would be challenging in any state. It will be particularly difficult in Maine.

Figure 2



Our shrinking K-12 school population is taking place in a state that already has extremely small school districts and very small schools. Some of the statistics are becoming familiar. Nationally, school districts have an average of about 3,200 pupils. In Maine, they have 734 students. An average school, primary and secondary, in the U.S. has 506 students; in Maine there are 290 students. The state also has twice as many administrators per student as the national average.

Maine has 290 separate school districts in a state of 492 organized municipalities, and it operates more than 700 schools, K-12.

Nor do teachers necessarily benefit from the current system. If there is one telling comparison about Maine's approach to public school organization, it is the salaries teachers earn. Despite Maine's 8th-in-the-nation support for its schools, it ranks 35th in teacher salaries, the lowest in New England, and its pay for beginning teachers ranks 47th, a dismaying fact given the broad public support for educa-

tion.[4] Because of the way Maine organizes districts and schools, it must employ far more teachers than average, and pays them less. Neighboring New Hampshire has regionalized more extensively. It spends about $1,000 per pupil less than Maine, but manages to pay each teacher about $3,000 more. *(See Figures 2 and 3)* The Legislature has increased Maine's statewide minimum salary, though where the money will come from is less clear.

Average school and district sizes are abstractions that may not have much resonance for school parents and even taxpayers. A more telling picture of Maine's existing school organization lies in its secondary schools, which are charged with providing comprehensive and specialized education for 9th-12th graders, preparing them for work and for higher education.

New Hampshire spends about $1,000 per pupil less than Maine, but manages to pay each teacher about $3,000 more

The High School Dilemma

Even the staunchest advocates of small schools usually agree that cooperation on a larger scale is necessary for high school education. In the state's larger cities, there are frequently several elementary schools and even multiple middle schools, but just one high school; only Portland, Maine's largest city, has two public high schools. Regional school districts often include elementary schools in various member towns but focus on one high school.

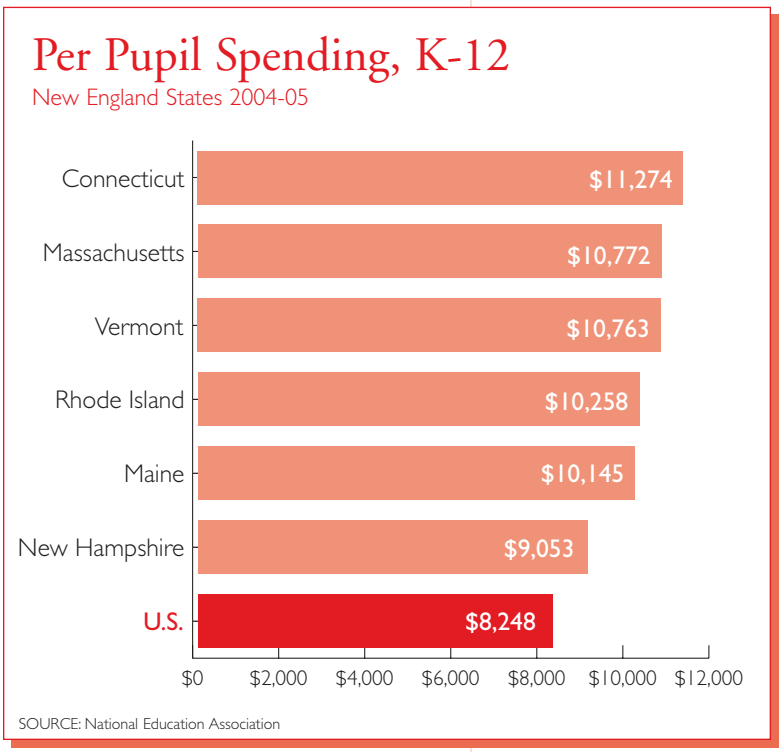
Even so, our high schools are quite small. Maine has 120 public high schools and a few private academies that are de facto public high schools for their areas. The smallest non-island school has just 49 students, K-12, and the largest 1,470. The median size of a Maine high school is 400 students, a startling figure given that high schools are expected to offer instruction not just in math, science, and English, but history, art, music, business, computers, applied technology, foreign languages, and a host of other subjects.[5] To say that the teaching staffs of many high schools are stretched thin is to understate the case.

High schools in Maine are smaller than most people realize. Only 13 have as many as 1,000 students, while 19 have fewer than 150. Some 40 high schools – one third – have fewer than 300 pupils. When considering all these numbers, one should bear in mind that they are expected to fall another 10 percent over the next decade.

Maine does have a number of small secondary schools that have been identified as "high performing" schools, producing exemplary student achievement without large budgets. Even these schools, however, must concentrate on "the basics," offering far fewer advanced and specialized courses – the very subjects that may capture the interest of individual students and provide a path to a life-long career.

The best available survey of high school offerings, conducted by the University of

Figure 3



Maine's Education Research Policy Institute, shows clearly that larger schools are able to offer much more comprehensive curriculums than smaller schools. All Maine high schools offer classes in U.S. and world history, literature, algebra, and physics. But in other subjects there are dramatic differences.

All high schools with 850 or more students offer Advanced Placement English, but only 47 percent of those with 200 or fewer students do. While 94 percent of large high schools have AP science courses, only 27 percent of small ones do. *(See Figure 5, page 12)*

Equally stark differences span the curriculum. For large schools, 76 percent offer dance, theater, and music courses; 27 percent of small schools do. While 88 percent of large schools offer German and Latin, only 13 percent of small schools do. Even chorus and band is not universal in smaller schools; 67 percent offer such courses, against 100 percent for larger schools.[6]

Larger schools are not necessarily better than smaller schools – each school is a separate community, with individual records of achievement and aspiration. Yet it is clear that students have greater opportunities to learn and explore when secondary schools achieve a certain size – a size larger than the typical Maine high school today.

Conflicts Over School Size

A comprehensive curriculum is a major concern in secondary education. So too is the cost of providing education in very small units, both for districts and individual schools.

The State Board of Education recognized this issue in rejecting an application for a new high school, and later a plan for major renovations of SAD 31's Penobscot Valley High School in Howland, even though the project had been placed on the board's approved, or "protected" list. The Board's concern was that the school's enrollment was just over 300, and falling. The State Board has since indicated it will be reluctant to fund new secondary schools with enrollments less than 450 – a directive that could potentially affect more than half the state's existing high schools.

Most of Maine's high schools will need replacing over the next 10 to 20 years. A 1996 state Department of Education survey showed that nearly half of all schools in Maine were built in the two decades after World War II, and few high schools constructed before 1965 meet current standards for accessibility, technology, and learning.

A decade ago, the department estimated that replacing all aging high schools in their existing form would cost well over $1 billion – a staggering figure, given that voter-approved general obligation bonds for all purposes average only $125 million a year. School construction is financed separately, through local bond issues on which the state pays interest and principal costs, and is covered under GPA. Still, the unmet need for high school replacement has only grown in the years since the state survey, and the cost of each new school has escalated rapidly. The current total of unmet needs could easily total $2 billion. So far, Maine has concentrated on replacing less expensive elementary and middle schools. The last three biennial school construction lists have contained 48 approved school projects, but only seven were for high schools, including the one rejected for SAD 31.

The State Board of Education says that small secondary schools are expensive to operate, and to build. On average, schools serving less than 500 students cost 15 percent more per pupil to build than larger schools, mostly because of the common areas required for each school building.

The differences in operating costs can be even greater. Averaging the costs in each group of 20 Maine higher schools, the cost per student rises as schools get smaller.

Per pupil expenditures in 2004-05 for the largest 20 Maine high schools averaged $6,385. For the 20 smallest schools, it was $10,306 per student — nearly $4,000 more. Though the differences were less dramatic in the middle range, each group of 20 high schools cost more to operate as it decreased in size. The second smallest group cost $7,636 per student, and the third group $7,466 – more than $1,000 per student higher than the largest schools. *(See Figure 4, page 9)*

At the high school level, particularly, Maine faces difficulties by continuing to operate so many small and shrinking schools. Its smallest schools offer less opportunity for students, cost more to operate, and face an uncertain future in an era of significant resistance to new public investment.

Regional Answers?

Regional services are the major tool available to deal with the pressing questions of school quality, on one hand, and concerns about efficiency and costs on the other. Regional cooperation can improve services while cutting costs, an outcome that ought to be equally welcome to parents, students and taxpayers. The other alternative – closing schools and laying off teachers – is distressing to consider, but far more common in other states than we care to admit.

Despite these powerful pressures, forced consolidation, whether mandated by the State Board of Education or the Legislature, will face fierce resistance. Maine has a strong sense of local control, enshrined by amendments to the state Constitution, and a tradition by which local communities make major decisions about how their children will be educated.

The Sinclair Act itself, which remains a model despite the five decades that have passed since its adoption, functioned largely through incentives, not coercion. No community was forced to close a school or eliminate a school board. The legislation provided financial incentives to regionalize, and reflected a consensus that increased state support would help provide better educational opportunities throughout the state. As a result, the state has assumed a major role in supporting and sustaining education that has only grown through both state and federal legislation. Now, the state must again become a leader in shaping and transforming the debate.

Greater cooperation, not confrontation, among the state and its municipalities and schools districts is essential to solving our public school dilemmas. There are several different paths that can be used to provide regional services.

The services schools provide can be broken down by function, instead of each school and district being viewed as an island unto itself. Some functions – maintenance, repair and purchasing – are the same as those provided by municipal departments in the same community. Others – transportation, food service, and collective bargaining – are not directly related to the classroom mission, and could be shared without changing schools or district lines. Even the high school program can be seen as a specialized function calling for regional solutions.

It is the mission of this report to turn the abstract arguments about regionalization for schools into concrete possibilities – to sketch the process by which schools and communities can join together for mutual benefit. No major change in public services can take place without a road map, and each of the following chapters will fill in portions of that map.

Regional cooperation can improve services while cutting costs, an outcome that ought to be equally welcome to parents, students and taxpayers.

Chapter 2

School Reform Since 1984

The EPS system, combined with the citizen referendum, does definitively answer the question of how much the state should spend, and how it should distribute aid to local schools.

From its earliest days, Maine's state government has played an important role in organizing and supporting public schools. Unlike most states, this role derives not primarily from the state Constitution but from statute and tradition. Expectations of state support have only increased in recent years, with profound consequences both for public education and the other programs basic to life in Maine.

In addition to financial support, the state has undertaken several ambitious efforts to improve school curriculum and performance, beginning with the Common Core of Learning, which resulted in the curriculum standards set in 1997 by the Learning Results, backed by statewide tests known as the Maine Educational Assessment, or MEA.

For the purpose of this review, 1984 looms as a particularly significant date. That was when the state pledged itself to the goal of providing 55 percent of General Purpose Aid to Education, the basic but not exclusive state means of supporting K-12 education. The 55 percent pledge raised the ante on the previous goal, adopted in the 1970s, of providing 50 percent state support for GPA. Through the late 1980s, the state moved closer to the ultimate goal, reaching the 50 percent mark in the budget approved by the Legislature in 1989.

A severe recession that began the following year halted efforts to increase the proportion of state funding. In 1991, the Legislature appropriated only as much money as it had approved for the previous fiscal year, a policy known as "flat funding," which continued for four years. This de facto method of decreasing the state share, since local school budgets continued to rise, produced a state share of 43 percent by 1995. In that year, the Legislature accepted the recommendation of a select panel to increase GPA support by 5 percent each of the next two years.[7] After that, state appropriations again increased every year, but only in proportion to local spending. The state share remained close to 43 percent for the next eight years.

The funding struggle

Lacking the financial resources 55 percent state aid would have provided, legislators and school officials engaged in a protracted struggle over the school funding formula by which aid is distributed to each district. The local share varies widely depending on the property tax base available to each municipality, from a minimum guarantee to as much as 90 percent state funding. The formula was amended to target greater aid to small rural districts that had been particularly hard-hit by flat funding. Later, it was amended again to include personal income in each municipality, as well as property valuation, as a standard for targeting aid. But in no case did the state establish any objective standard for educational adequacy, or base its contribution on anything other than the previous year's appropriation and the total of local spending. "Spread sheet politics" became the rule at the Legislature, and the people's representatives were increasingly expected to vote on changes in the formula according to whether schools in their districts received more or less aid than the previous years. Substantial legislative time was consumed each session in designing financial "cushions" to compensate school districts that had lost aid since the previous budget. School districts, meanwhile, did not receive state aid totals in time to prepare their budgets.

In June 2004, the voters took matters into their own hands by approving a referendum sponsored by the Maine Municipal Association. It put into law the requirement, not a goal, that the state pay 55 percent of GPA each year. In the legislation that implemented this requirement, LD 1, the Legislature amended the initiated bill to phase in 55 percent state funding over four years. It also adopted a new financing mechanism for the Essential Programs and Services model adopted in the 2004 legislative session.[8]

Under EPS, the state Department of Education calculates for each school department or district the spending needed to provide an adequate education for its students, and contributes the balance of funding above the required local share. In the biennial state budget to be approved in 2007, for the school year beginning September 2008, LD 1 says state aid must reach 55 percent of the EPS standards and remain at that level each succeeding year.

The EPS system, combined with the citizen referendum, does definitively answer the question of how much the state should spend, and how it should distribute aid to local schools. Local officials must raise a designated amount, expected to be $8 per thousand of valuation by 2008, from property taxes, and also pay for local option spending above the limits of EPS. The state pays the balance.

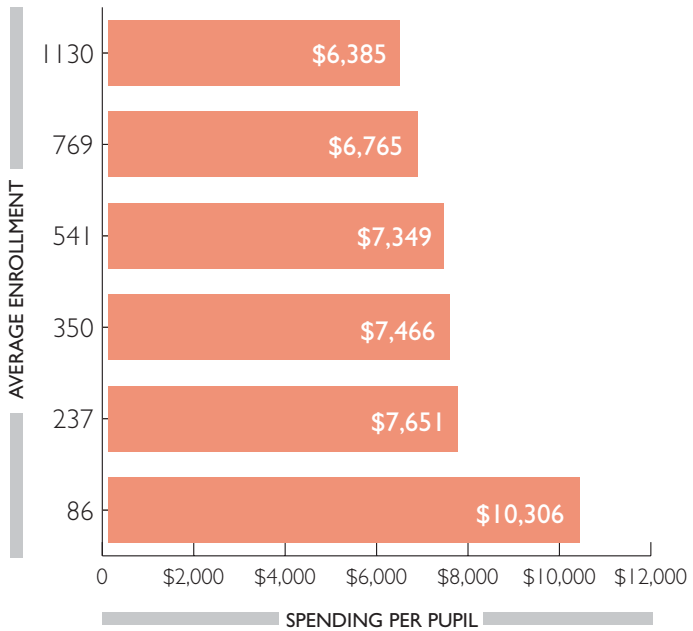
The total state financial role in supporting K-12 education is even larger than the 55 percent requirement would suggest. The state also pays the entire cost of the employer share of teacher retirement, and a portion of retiree health care costs, an arrangement not available to other municipal employees. State spending for these provisions totaled $152 million in the current fiscal year, and is budgeted for $205 million in the following year, when full funding of the retirement system is supposed to resume.[9] Added to GPA support, by 2008 the state will provide more than 60 percent of the total cost of providing K-12 education, which would be a proportion higher than that of any other New England state.

Over the years, the strong citizen support for K-12 education in Maine has been impressive. At least 90 percent of all students attend public schools, and few question the importance of education as a long-term priority. But the long struggle over the appropriate level of state financial support has tended to consume much of the energy available for school reform. While Maine has made major strides in using state funds to support local schools, and to distribute aid on the basis of each municipality's ability to pay for schools through property taxes, other reform measures have faltered.

Figure 4

High School Spending Per Pupil

Maine 2004-05



SOURCE: College of Education and Development, University of Southern Maine

THE SINCLAIR ACT

50 years later

While not at the tip of every citizen's tongue, the Sinclair Act is still a familiar name to most educators and state officials. Passed in 1957, the act is by common consent the most significant single piece of education law ever adopted in Maine.

Named for Sen. Roy Sinclair of Somerset County, its sponsor, this ambitious bill also benefited from the support of Gov. Edmund Muskie, then serving his second two-year term before representing Maine in the U.S. Senate for 22 years. The regionalization proposed and carried out by the Sinclair Act came later than in other states, which, as G.I.s returned home from World War II, launched numerous initiatives to educate returning veterans.

Maine had, then and now, a strong tradition of local control. The Sinclair Act did not command regionalization by consolidation, but it did convince Maine municipalities to form 64 multi-town school administrative districts, or SADs, as they have come to be known.

According to a 2003 lecture by USM researcher David Silvernail, at the time of the Sinclair Act Maine had more than 120 high schools with fewer than 100 students, and one-third of Maine students were educated in schools smaller than 300. Such schools, the designers of the Sinclair Act found, were far more expensive to operate and produced less satisfactory educational results than larger schools.

The Jacobs Report of 1956, which helped spur legislation the following year, put the matter bluntly:

"The existence of the many small town school administrative units, designated as the responsibility of individual town governments, places major handicaps on the establishment of a most effective school finance system, and on the attainment of adequate educational opportunity for all children throughout the state."

The Sinclair Act aimed to remedy that situation with a combination of mandates and incentives. Schools that agreed to form regional districts were given a subsidy bonus of 10 percent. The state expanded its share of school construction costs, and limited local debt. The new schools educated students at a savings in today's dollars of $400 per student, and were credited with improving curriculums and expanding course offerings.

Regional districts were naturally more common in rural areas, but acceptance varied considerably. In Aroostook County, a dozen such districts were cre-

The sweeping nature of LD 1's financial and school funding reforms will take at least four years to implement. But the policy is established, and appears unlikely to change. The conclusion of this 20-year debate should allow Maine to focus on arguably more important questions, including the content of what students learn, and how the schools they attend should be organized and administered.

Standards for Learning

The fate of the Education of Reform Act of 1985 and later, the Learning Results, is instructive. Among its other features, which included raising minimum teacher salaries, were requirements that all schools provide additional staff and services, such as art and music teaching and guidance counseling at the elementary level. These "mandates," as they came to be known, resulted in the hiring of an additional 4,000 teachers and staff statewide, even though overall enrollment did not increase. The first MEA tests increased local accountability and, over their first decade, statewide scores rose.

But not all aspects of the initiative fared as well. When the 1990 recession hit and state support plummeted, the mandates for staffing were removed. This particular initiative proved unsustainable, and the reversal left educators wondering about the course of state curriculum policy.

The curriculum standards that came to be known as Learning Results, formally adopted

ated; in Washington County, just two, one of which is now disbanding. In some areas, the number of students per district is smaller now than it was when the Sinclair Act was passed.

Other provisions of the law established policy baselines still reflected in state policy. A minimum teacher salary was set, and districts faced the loss of state aid if they did not comply. (In the Brennan administration the minimum salary was raised to $15,000, and in 2006 the Legislature set two steps to a $30,000 minimum by the 2007-08 school year.) The law also created a "foundation aid" allocation for each school district, rather than simply reimbursing expenses. The more ambitious Essential Programs and Services model adopted in 2004 employs a similar principle.

At the time of the Sinclair Act, Maine's school expenditures per pupil lagged the national average by 22 percent, putting the state 11th lowest in the country, while teacher's salaries were 6th lowest. Fifty years later, per pupil expenditures have risen considerably, with Maine 8th highest in the country. Yet the state continues to have low teacher salaries, at least in part because of the small school district sizes that prevail.

The Sinclair Act represents the high water mark of regional cooperation in Maine. While the decade over which it unfolded did persuade 230 of our 492 towns to band together to provide school services, few other municipalities have joined them in the 40 years since.

Noting the creation of a Governor's task force on school regionalization in 2003, Silvernail concluded his lecture by saying, "We are fast approaching a historic opportunity for the Legislature and citizens here in Maine to rise to the occasion – to move us even closer to the ultimate goal of student equity of opportunities."

Three years later, that remains a road not taken.

ROY SINCLAIR

in 1997, have also steered a somewhat erratic course. Originally, they were meant to extend the learning of all students to a broad range of subjects and activities, including courses sometimes considered "electives," such as art and music.

Unlike many states, Maine does not use required textbooks nor does the State Board of Education adopt particular course standards, leaving those decisions to local school boards and educators. The Learning Results have been the primary means by which the state attempts to guide curriculum, and recently the effort has flagged.

By the turn of the century, all high school graduating classes were supposed to have achieved Learning Results standards. But the effective date has been repeatedly postponed. The state has not chosen to create statewide or regional assessments of Learning Result compliance, leaving that to local districts. Some have completed the local assessments, others have not. A one-year moratorium on implementation ordered by the state has left the ultimate fate of the initiative in doubt.

Recently, the Department of Education has suggested that the Learning Results be pared back to "core areas," such as reading, writing and mathematics, in line with testing required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. It has also adopted the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) as the assessment instrument for 11th graders, replacing the multi-subject MEAs, while continuing MEA exams for 4th and 8th graders. Originally, compliance with Learning Results standards was supposed to be required for high school graduation. That principle, too, is now in question.

The long struggle over the appropriate level of state financial support has tended to consume much of the energy available for school reform.

Whatever one's view of the specific decisions involved in setting, delaying and changing curriculum standards, it is clear that Maine has not been as successful in resolving the question of what children should learn as it has been with how schools should be funded.

The reasons behind this lack of success may involve more than differences over whether art and music should be put on a par with reading and mathematics. It likely owes a great deal to the way Maine schools are organized and administered, and the way in which the state's desire for high educational standards is thwarted by a lack of available resources. Even the 55 percent pledge written into law can only be met if successive legislatures continue to see education as important and sustainable in relation to other needs that citizens see as worthy of state support.

Even with below-average personal incomes, Maine spends more per public school student than all but a handful of other states. Despite this impressive support, however, many districts report that they are unable to either meet Learning Results standards or to complete assessments of their existing efforts.

School Organization

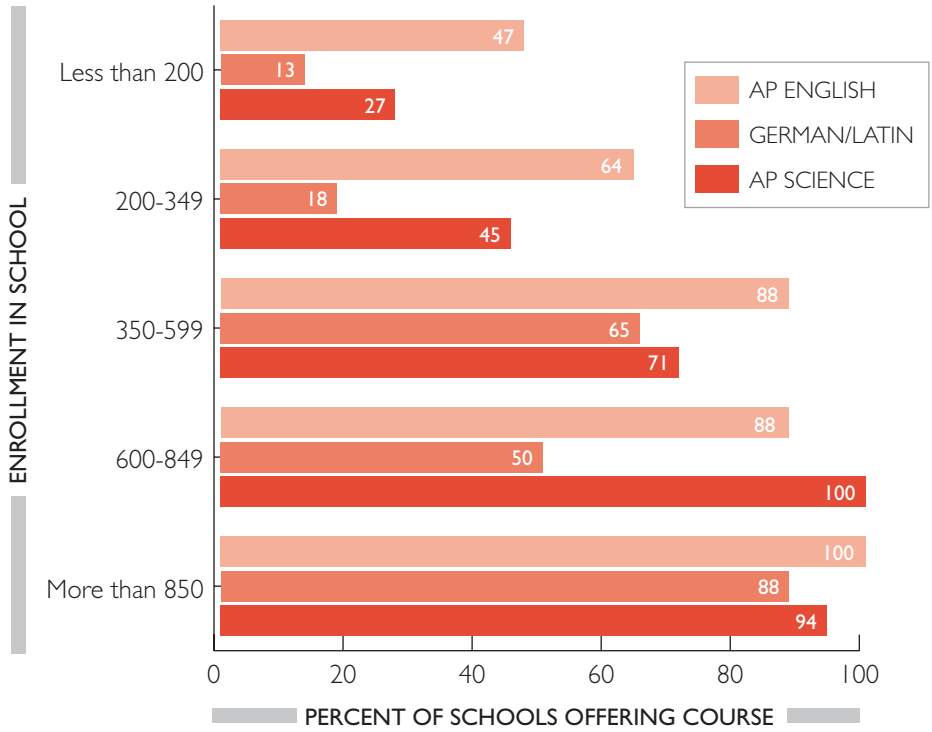
Efforts to define the appropriate state share of education costs began in the 1970s, and have only just been completed. Efforts to establish strong learning standards for all students began in the 1980s with the Common Core of Learning. By contrast, the last major effort to improve the organization and administration of schools dates from 1957 and passage of the Sinclair Act, named for state Sen. Roy Sinclair of Somerset County. (See "The Sinclair Act, 50 years later," *page 10)*

The Sinclair Act authorized the creation of regional school districts – which came to be known as School Administrative Districts, or SADs – and authorized significant state financial support for the new districts. To date, 77 SADs have been formed, though not all of them

Figure 5

Maine High School Course Offerings

2004-05



SOURCE: Center for Research and Evaluation, University of Maine

are multi-municipality districts. Some SADs involve up to 10 municipalities and have a single school board; others comprise more modest numbers of communities.

The process of creating SADs ended in the mid-1960s; none have been formed since then. That particular effort to promote regionalization did enlist more than 200 municipalities in formal alliance with neighboring towns, but the state still maintains some 290 separate school units.

As the impetus toward SAD organization waned, the Legislature reauthorized an earlier form of regional cooperation, known as Community School Districts, or CSDs, of which 17 have been created to date. CSDs are essentially overlays on existing school unions, in which several towns share a superintendent and central office. Unions were first formed in the 1930s among smaller towns after the state required that each town employ a professional school superintendent. Union towns share central office expenses without other formal ties. In CSDs, each town retains its own board and, generally, its elementary schools, while cooperatively administering a common secondary school, usually involving grades 9-12 or 7-12. Further discussion of SAD and CSD arrangements is included in Chapter 3.

A further, though lesser known step toward regional cooperation came when the state, beginning in 1965, established 26 regions for vocational education. Typically, the member school departments and districts jointly operate a regional vocational center, which offers half-day or full-day programs. Each school board is supposed to cooperate in setting calendars and designing programs.

These three programs – SADs, CSDs, and regional vocational centers — provide the sum of state support of regional cooperation across municipal lines, and have not been significantly changed in 30 to 40 years.

High Expectations

It is the premise of this report that sustained attention to the organization of Maine schools is overdue. Enormous changes have occurred in public expectations for schools. A high school diploma is now expected for nearly every student who attends Maine schools, and post-secondary training in colleges and universities is also increasingly seen as a necessity.

Many schools are not equipped to meet these challenges. When Maine adopted the sales tax in 1951 and the income tax in 1969, the primary intent was to better and more equitably support public education. The 55 percent funding guarantee, plus the EPS system, is the apparent final result of that effort. Simply put, Mainers want every young person, no matter where they live, to have an equal chance at a good education, and the state has exerted enormous amounts of tax dollars and political will to achieve this goal.

The current situation should remind us that funding alone is an insufficient means to that laudable end. Even equal dollars per student cannot achieve the same results when schools lack the necessary size or human resources. Many Mainers cherish small schools, but by contemporary standards many schools, particularly at the secondary levels, are too small to achieve the goal of equal access. In other regions, where sheer numbers of students are not an issue, parents may lack options to find the school their child needs.

Maine's attention must now shift from funding schools, a debate largely resolved, to learning in schools, and how the classroom can be organized and equipped to provide the best possible education.

Mainers want each young person, no matter where they live, to have an equal chance at a good education.

Chapter 3

The State's Role in Reform

When the Legislature installed the Essential Programs and Services model within a new school funding formula in January 2005, it marked a landmark in the long struggle over appropriate state funding of public schools.

The debate the public was most aware of focused on the amount of state funding, a question essentially settled with passage of the Maine Municipal Association's referendum proposal in June 2004. It set 55 percent of General Purpose Aid as the appropriate amount. But an equally important debate, best known to legislators and school administrators, concerns the distribution of the money the state provides. Before adoption of EPS and a minimum tax effort standard for municipalities, the distribution was set by an overly complex formula that included property valuation, personal income, and other factors. The formula then distributed the total GPA funding the Legislature was willing to provide, usually a percentage increase over the previous year.

EPS provides a more objective standard, and specifically relates state assistance to the services provided by each school district, with regional adjustments. It represents the state's best estimate for what each school district needs to spend to ensure an adequate education.

Since consideration of each local school budget is now linked to EPS, release of the first EPS figures in 2005 proved to be an eye-opening experience for many school boards and citizens. EPS calculated whether each school district was spending more, or less, than the EPS target. LD 1, the implementing legislation, also provides that whoever approves the budget – a city council, school district meeting, or referendum vote – must authorize any spending beyond EPS.

Overall, school districts exceeded their EPS target for the 2005-06 school year by 3.3 percent.[10] This was in line with predictions by the Department of Education. EPS is not a budget cap or an explicit attempt to limit spending, however. Even if all districts complied with their EPS budget figures, Maine would still spend significantly more per pupil than the national average.

From the perspective of regional services, it is the pattern of spending by local districts that is more significant. There is far more variability in compliance with EPS from district to district than there is between the projected and actual amount of total education spending.

Both critics and supporters of EPS suggest that it will encourage a more regional approach. Some also contend that the system is biased against rural schools, or those outside more densely populated areas. Overall, the actual figures do not support the latter argument, though some districts have special circumstances no single formula can capture.

Some small districts do reasonably well in adhering to their EPS numbers. Some large districts have trouble meeting them. The most important factors appear to relate more to school district organization and administration than sheer size, although – as seen in Chapter 1's discussion of high schools – it is true that very small schools are particularly expensive to operate.

This is not to say the EPS system cannot be improved. Some educators believe that services not included by the state are indeed "essential" and that some EPS components, such as teacher salaries, should be revised. The state should use the experience of implementation to refine and improve measurements so EPS becomes a reliable indicator of what it takes to produce an adequate education.

Regional Structures

One striking EPS pattern relates to the state's two existing regional school structures. One is the SAD (school administrative district) which generally involves two or more towns operating with a single, jointly elected school board under a superintendent.

The other is the CSD (community school district) which preserves an existing school union structure – several towns with separate schools boards and budgets, sharing only a superintendent and central office. The CSD continues to have a superintendent reporting to numerous town school boards, and operates a joint secondary school (usually, 7-12 or 9-12) with still another school board in charge. CSD administration thus involves at least three separate school boards – town, union and CSD – to set budgets and make other educational decisions. A school board member who serves on all three panels can expect to attend dozens of meetings a year. One CSD that proposed to reduce its maximum meeting count from 55 meetings to 34 annually – all of which must be attended by a superintendent — planned to do so by shifting to quarterly sessions.

This inefficient decision-making process parallels significant inefficiencies in the budget and the educational decision-making process. Every one of Maine's 15 CSDs exceeded its EPS targets for the current year by 2 to 40 percent, with average spending of 15 percent over EPS.

By contrast, almost half the state's 62 multi-town SADs spent less than their EPS target. Of the 32 SADs that did exceed EPS, 11 came within 2 percent of the target. Thus two-thirds of the regional SADs exceeded the budget discipline of every single CSD.

It is not surprising that the last two major educational study commissions, one commissioned by the Legislature, the other a task force appointed by the Governor, concluded that the union school structure should be phased out. The budget experience of other union towns, many of which tuition their high school students elsewhere, parallels those involved in CSDs.

In fact, the state has been promoting the need for more regional cooperation among school districts for at least a decade, citing first the projected decline in enrollment, then an actual decline over the past 10 years. The slow exodus of students has left Maine with just over 200,000 students in 290 school districts. Most local school officials say they've heard this message whenever they are considering new school construction, realigning schools, or making renovations. But no significant movement toward greater cooperation across district lines has yet occurred, although some larger towns and SADs have begun to consolidate schools.

Before considering possible answers to why the state's message has not been more effective, a look at existing regional structures is appropriate.

The slow exodus of students has left Maine with just 200,000 students in 290 school districts.

Fruits of the Sinclair Act

By most standards, even Maine's 62 functioning school administrative districts represent a modest level of regionalization. (Eight SADs involve only a single town. They were adopted for budget purposes, to keep schools separate from other municipal departments.)

Recent studies by University of Maine researchers have asserted that Maine's average school district, with 734 students, is far below the size considered optimal for both educational quality and financial efficiency, which they found to be 3,700.[11] By this standard,

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

An Experiment that Works

When you approach some high schools, there's little to tell you where you are and what to expect inside. Not here. The legend above the door, "Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School" says volumes about the school and its programs.

The cooperative effort of eight small, mostly rural towns that formed SAD 17 some 40 years ago, the high school was renovated and doubled in size, to 265,000 square feet, in a project finished in 1998. With 1,250 students, it is the fourth largest high school in Maine, and it has the qualities that prompt strong community support – a comprehensive curriculum, high rates of graduation and post-secondary placement, and winning athletic teams.

But Oxford Hills is also an educational experiment, one that has received less notice than one might expect given the state's substantial investment. When the new school was being planned, it was decided to take the separate vocational and academic high schools on site and join them into a seamless unit.

Superintendent Mark Eastman, who's been with the district 11 years, says the challenge was to reinvigorate high school programs, which were then tracked, as in most secondary schools, into college-bound, general, and vocational. "The kids in the middle were being left out," he said. "They weren't being given any direction." School adminstrators and teachers were also committed to eliminating the divide that often exists between vocational students and the academic tracks. The challenge was to end tracking while raising, rather than lowering, academic standards across the board.

The solution, simple but also radical, was to combine the former "tracked" classes and classrooms throughout the new building. The electronics program is located right next door to a foreign language classroom. The wood and metals programs are given separate space, but they're next to science and math classrooms.

Student schedules are similarly integrated. Eastman notes that the school's valedictorian, due to attend MIT, takes both AP mathematics and the vocational computer assisted design course. Many schools have been seeking to eliminate tracking and academic achievement gaps. Few have designed their schools from the ground up to meet this goal.

The new Oxford Hills has vocational facilities that would be the envy of many technical colleges. The state was willing to allocate more space per student to the project, which cost $29.5 million with state and local shares, because it promised not only to solve educational problems, but operate efficiently; the district currently spends 5 percent less than its EPS allocation.

only two SADs – SAD 6 (Bonny Eagle, Standish area) and SAD 17 (Oxford Hills) would be considered optimal. Another four SADs enroll more than 3,000 students.

Most SADs involve only a handful of towns and relatively small numbers of students. Of the 62 multi-town SADs, 15 involve two towns, 14 have three towns, and another 14 have four towns. The largest number of towns in a regional district is in Waldo County, where SAD 3 (Mount View) has 11 members, but there are only 1,500 students and seven schools between them. There are nine towns in SAD 9 (Mt. Blue/Farmington) and eight in SAD 17 (Oxford Hills). The other 18 SADs involve between five and seven towns.

Still, SADs are the only reason that Maine has 290 rather than 492 school districts, which is the number of incorporated municipalities. The 62 regional SADs originally involved 264 municipalities, or about four per district. SADs operate five of the 11 largest high schools in the state, the only ones enrolling as many as 1,100 students.

The regional school district was authorized by the Sinclair Act of 1957, and the first one, SAD 1, based in Presque Isle, was chartered the following year. (See "The Sinclair Act," *page 10)* All of Maine's SADs were in place by 1969. The most recent such district, SAD 77, formerly based in East Machias, dissolved July 1, 2006 creating four more town school boards. Two of them will overseeing fewer than 50 students in their own schools.

Entering the various classrooms, one sees things not usually found in Maine public schools. The truck driving class has big rigs parked inside. The wood technologies class has whole buildings under construction. Forestry students are mapping harvests using sophisticated computer software programs. And in the computer assisted design lab, the entire class is at work on models, technical drawings, and mockups of a three-story building. This is not just an architectural design. It is the actual plans for the new exhibition building at the Oxford County fairgrounds – a fair that used to be located where the high school now sits, at what has become the commercial center of South Paris.

Among the guiding lights of the new high school was the long-time vocational director, Jim McKinney, who didn't live to see the project finished but was influential in its design. Now, the high school principal and the vocational director have offices side by side, and talk daily – a situation also not likely to be observed in most Maine secondary schools.

The successes of the school track the successes of the region. Unlike many rural parts of Maine, the Oxford Hills areas is growing in population, and has a diverse economic base, including many small manufacturing firms. "We can offer a lot of programs that most high school can't," Eastman said. The trick, he added, is to maintain attention to individual students through team teaching and "school within a school" features, while offering maximum opportunities in the classroom. The school has invested in a large staff of guidance counselors, who are able to keep tabs on students and offer both personal and career advice.

Eastman credits the school's program and its efficiency in part to central administrative direction. SAD 17/Oxford Hills has a single school board of 22 members, with each of the eight towns getting at least two seats – "so when someone is absent, the town is still represented." The large board functions more like a legislative body than a typical school board, with committees working out important decision on contracts, budgets and curriculum, which are then ratified by the full board. The board meets monthly, and its meetings rarely last more than 90 minutes. "It certainly makes my job a lot simpler," Eastman said.

While the high school is among the state's largest, SAD 17 has also built small schools. Each town now has its own elementary school, with Hebron, with 88 pupils, the smallest. "The state was willing to approve small schools for us because we worked together on the large ones," he said.

Most school districts considering new high schools have been encouraged to visit Oxford Hills, and many have. No one has yet built a new school using this model, but then the major replacements for Maine's aging high schools still lie in the future.

CSDs are a bit younger. After being revived in 1965, all but two existing CSDs were formed by 1973. It has thus been more than 30 years since formal regionalization agreements have created much interest.

This may be, in large part, because the whole concept of regionalism has fallen out of favor. Larger schools were seen as progressive, and necessary, in the 1950s and '60s, in large part because amid the Baby Boom more children were in school, and many more completed high school. It was clear that small communities could not provide a comprehensive secondary school curriculum.

Now, declining enrollments present a different rationale for cooperation. So far, though, the state has demonstrated little effective leadership in encouraging new forms of regionalism.

The Sinclair Act was explicit and direct in its promotion of regional districts. Those towns that joined together in an SAD got a 10 percent subsidy bonus. The idea was that, after the subsidies expired, towns would continue to enjoy savings. As the EPS figures demonstrate, this theory has been borne out by experience.

Such explicit subsidies for regional districts seem unlikely today. Three decades of squabbling over shares of state funding have made town and school officials suspicious and often resistant to any further changes. The EPS system, when fully implemented, will

provide the same state funding to municipalities whether they are members of a regional district or not. The past two decades have seen dozens of studies and attempts by towns to withdraw from SADs, some successful, almost entirely over issues of cost sharing with other towns. Except for local costs exceeding EPS, the new system should eliminate that source of friction within SADs.

School Construction Dilemmas

It has been more than 30 years since formal regionalization agreements have created much interest.

Where the state does have substantial influence is in the school construction programs that most municipalities rely on when building new schools or enlarging existing buildings. In its traditional program, the state uses a complex assessment of "need," which assesses existing facilities, whether enrollment is growing, and local financial capacity. The State Board of Education then decides whether a given project is appropriate to educational needs. Every two years, the board establishes a "protected" list that, within available funding, is supposed to guarantee state funding for each high-ranking project.

In the early 1990s, very few new schools were built. Once the Legislature voted to substantially increase the amount available for state-paid interest on local school bonds, more than a dozen projects were approved in each of the next four two-year funding cycles. Lately, the lists have again become a shorter as projects become larger and more expensive.

Although the state has not surveyed the state of school buildings since 1996, it's clear a major backlog of unmet needs exists, and is probably growing. Few high schools built before 1975 – the vast majority – can be considered suitable for contemporary curriculums.

Still, even the promise of new schools has done less than expected to promote greater regional cooperation. The State Board has been inconsistent. As recently as the late 1980s it funded a variety of very small elementary schools, with enrollments under 100, while also approving multiple schools in one community. More recently, the Board has reversed course. It is now working on rules that would encourage a standard of 350 students for new elementary schools and 450 students for new high schools. These enrollment figures are substantially greater than the median size for existing elementary schools, and also above the median size for high schools. If these numbers became benchmarks, fewer than half the existing schools in Maine would be eligible for state-supported replacements.

Recent test cases for new standards have provided plenty of conflict. Penobscot Valley High School in Howland, serving SAD 31, was placed on the protected list which, in the view of local officials, meant that the state would help finance a new school.

Instead, a protracted three-year battle ensued. Even though Penobscot Valley had nearly 300 students at the time, its enrollment was projected to drop sharply, and the board declined to fund a comparable replacement. Enrollment did fall, to 234 students by this year, and a new plan to build an addition and renovation was also rejected. SAD 31 will be given access to a separate school renovation fund to cover repairs to existing buildings. In the meantime, the district has gone through four permanent and acting superintendents and has lost two member towns.

A new test is looming on the current protected list, which includes Machias High School, a 50-year-old facility in need of an upgrade. But Machias has only 130 students, including those from six Union 102 towns that also send high school students elsewhere. Unlike SAD 31, Machias' place on the protected list comes with the knowledge that the state will not build new school facilities solely for that number of students. But it remains unclear how the State Board will actually deal with small districts. (See "Where Distance Education is a Way of Life," *page 34)*

Rules vs. Policy

State officials say they favor regional solutions. In one recent instance, Waterville and Winslow were assured that state funding would be available if they agreed to build a joint high school.

But in fact the current rules do not permit a joint construction application. One existing school district would have to apply, and then presumably obtain a waiver to allow others to participate. This falls far short of an inviting, well-understood process by which towns and schools that are interested in formal cooperation can get a predictable state response.

It is important to remember that formal school district ties are not the only reasonable response to regional challenges. Cooperative services between districts are equally feasible alternatives. These various options will be more fully examined in Chapter 5, "Pathways to Regional Cooperation."

Chicken and Egg

Ever since Governor Baldacci announced in his 2003 inaugural address that the state should pursue regionalization of local services, there has been widespread anticipation that the state would devise a plan.

For the most part, this expectation has gone unfulfilled. After the administration presented a school regionalization bill in 2004 that passed the House, but was defeated in the Senate, there has been no further legislative activity. Critics faulted that bill for not offering a clear enough connection between regional cooperation and the proposed state subsidies that would have been offered.[12] Subsequently, the governor suggested that regional efforts might best begin at a local, grassroots level, and "bubble up."

More likely, the process will have to work both ways. Ideas and initiatives at the local level are numerous and in some case far-reaching, as Chapter 4 explores. But without rules, incentives, and a framework to facilitate cooperation that only the state can provide, regional efforts will founder or be unduly limited in scope.

Above all, school administrators, parents and citizens will need a road map for changes that will enable them to see potential advantages clearly, and spell out the process step-by-step. So far, the map is mostly blank.

A recent draft report by the State Board on "revisioning education" recommends that Maine's 290 school districts be reduced to 35, based on Senate district lines. This would create an average district size of 3,700, the figure the University of Maine study suggested was ideal. Yet how Maine would proceed from hundreds of districts currently to about one-tenth that number is not at all obvious.[13]

Even if one agrees that fewer districts would be desirable, who would lead the effort? Unlike many states, Maine lacks the structures to examine such epochal changes.

In some states, the Commissioner of Education takes the lead; in others, the State Board of Education. Maine tends to divide responsibility between the State Board, the Department of Education, and the Legislature's joint Education Committee, with governors pursuing initiatives through the Department. In such circumstances, it is particularly important that local understanding and cooperation be invited and obtained before proceeding to reforms that, in all likelihood, will take several years to carry out.

State leadership and local initiative are both required; this need not be a chicken and egg dilemma if those principles are honored.

Without rules, incentives, and a framework to facilitate cooperation that only the state can provide, regional efforts will founder or be unduly limited in scope

Chapter 4

What Local Schools are Doing

The grassroots initiatives toward regional cooperation that Governor Baldacci has called for are occurring all over Maine. Quietly, often without fanfare or publicity, educators are discussing sharing services, combining programs, and seeking more educationally sound and financially efficient arrangements for operating public schools.

The efforts chronicled in this chapter are representative and are not intended to provide a complete picture. They are chosen as examples of what is happening in Maine schools and communities, and what might happen in the near-term future. What is notable about many of the recent efforts is that they are incomplete. In some cases, they have met obstacles at the local level; in others, they require greater state coordination and support to be successful. Interest in regionalism is high, but barriers to successful cooperation are significant. Those who support the concept and practice of regional cooperation need to devote close attention to how those barriers can be removed.

Penobscot River Educational Partnership (PREP)

The Penobscot River Educational Partnership is better known by its acronym, PREP. Formed in 1996, it represents one of the oldest and most successful efforts in Maine to pool educational resources cooperatively without consolidation or formal district-to-district agreements.

It cuts across institutional boundaries to link the University of Maine's Orono campus, and its colleges of education, business, and liberal arts, with a large number of area public schools to offer professional development programs. These include Brewer, Bucksport, School Union 90 (Milford), Indian Island School, Union 91 (Orrington), SAD 22 (Hampden), Union 87 (Orono), with participation from Penobscot County Child Development Services and the United Technologies Center in Bangor.

Among its specific initiatives are improved guidance services, physical science education for grades 6-9, local assessment systems for Learning Results, more effective special education programs, and interaction between schools and University of Maine students and faculty.

Recently, it has begun offering contracted services for the psychological evaluation of elementary students, since several member districts were having difficulty finding qualified psychologists on their own.[14]

Involving a large number of schools and districts in an organized coalition, with an executive director, dues, and a formal governance structure, PREP could expand its regional services considerably, should the state decide to use this model.

SAD 17, Oxford Hills

The eight towns that make up SAD 17, known as the Oxford Hills School District, represent one of the largest and perhaps most complex regional districts in Maine. Formed in 1961, the district was initially envisioned as a partnership between the area's two largest towns, Norway and Paris. But the smaller adjacent towns also expressed interest in joining, and by 1965, SAD 17 spanned a large part of the western foothills, with Norway, Paris, Harrison, Hebron, Otisfield, Oxford, Waterford and West Paris as member towns.

None of these towns has a population greater than 5,000, but together they educate more than 3,600 students under a single 22-member school board. Although some of the towns lacked a school at the beginning, each now has its own elementary school.

The centerpiece of the district is Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School in South Paris, enrolling 1,250 students in grades 9-12. It is the fourth largest high school in Maine, and one of the few whose enrollment has increased markedly over the last 10 years.

The renovation and expansion of Oxford Hills, completed in 1998, is of great interest in considering the benefits of regional cooperation. Approved by the State Board of Education as a prospective model for other high school projects, Oxford Hills is unique in combining its traditional academic and vocational programs into a unified curriculum. There is no vocational building or "wing" at Oxford Hills, and students from all programs, including college preparatory classes, attend many of the same courses. The breadth of educational choices for students may be unparalleled in a Maine high school.

(See also "Strength in Numbers: An Experiment that Works," *page 16)*

SAD 50, Thomaston area and SAD 5, Rockland area

Not all regional education projects are initiated by educators. In the Rockland-Thomaston area, business leaders have been influential in putting forward a cooperative vision more comprehensive than any yet seen in Maine. The Many Flags project aims to go well beyond cooperation or consolidation of public schools, K-12. It seeks to offer services on a single campus from the University of Maine System, the Maine Community College System, Regional Vocational Center 8, and two existing regional school districts, SAD 5 and SAD 50.

While Maine's public educational institutions sometimes seem to lack depth, their breadth is impressive. Divisions and branches of the university, public colleges, high schools and technical centers exist in every part of the state. The Many Flags project is perhaps the first attempt to try to get to them to think strategically, as if they were part of a single state educational enterprise. (See also "Schools as an Economic Magnet," *page 25)*

The Many Flags effort exists alongside one launched by the regional school districts – SAD 50, based in Thomaston (with Saint George and Cushing) and SAD 5, based in Rockland (with South Thomaston and Owls Head).

Georges Valley High School in Thomaston, built 40 years ago, has about 340 students, but its enrollment is expected to drop below 300 over the next few years. Its facilities are inadequate and overcrowded for a contemporary curriculum, yet without enrollment growth it does not appear feasible to build a replacement that would meet the community's expectations.

SAD 50 initiated talks with its counterparts in SAD 5, and has held many public meetings over the last two years. The public, initially skeptical, has now embraced the concept of a cooperative high school, and the administration is seeking partners. A major obstacle, however, is the state's school construction process. While state officials have been encouraging, there is now no means to make a joint application. While the community appears ready to pursue a regional school, it does not yet have a clear path to that goal.[15]

(See also "Two High Schools Consider Sharing...with a twist," *page 22)*

TWO HIGH SCHOOLS CONSIDER SHARING

...with a twist

When a task force for Georges Valley High School in Thomaston began reviewing options for replacing the 40-year-old building, it quickly ran up against some financial and demographic facts.

The school serves students in Thomaston, St. George and Cushing (SAD 50) and has an enrollment of 340, which is projected to decline quickly over the next five year to about 250. Given these shrinking numbers, it's unlikely the state will provide funding for a replacement school. Building a new school with local dollars would cost an additional $250-$600 per year for a typical homeowner.

So the task force decided to look into partnering with another school district. While its report, filed November 2005, is not specific about who that partner would be, the obvious choice would be Rockland, where SAD 5 also educates high school students from South Thomaston and Owl's Head. All six municipalities are in a relatively compact area along Penobscot Bay.

But Judy Harvey, SAD 50 superintendent, found that a joint project, even if the Rockland area wants to participate, would not be easy to accomplish. Officials in Augusta speak favorably of the idea, but "The state doesn't have a process for this," she said during a tour of the Thomaston campus. "We could apply, or they could, but they don't have a way to handle what we're suggesting."

One can see why Georges Valley would like a new facility. The building isn't drastically overcrowded, in terms of space per student, but most of its classrooms have glaring inadequacies compared to high schools built in the last two decades. Rather than a studio look, the art classroom appears more like an overstuffed attic. The library is far from contemporary, and teachers have a long list of unmet needs.

Harvey says she supports the idea of emphasizing a core curriculum that conceivably could pare back the number of courses. "But what do you do for staff development?" she asks. "In a small high school, teachers may not have any peers to talk to. They may not even see another physics teacher except at a conference or workshop."

Rockland High School, about the same age as Georges Valley, has 480 students today, but enrollment is also declining. By the time a new school could open the two districts would have about 650-700 high school students — for Maine, a medium size

Waterville, Winslow and SAD 47

An informal coalition of superintendents in the Northern Kennebec region has long been pursuing cooperative ventures to increase educational offerings and promote efficiency. In addition to a well-organized vocational-technical center, these school districts share academic courses, adult education classes, and other services.

Cooperation has increased significantly in recent years. SAD 47, the Messalonskee District (Sidney, Belgrade and Oakland) has provided all transportation services to Waterville, and central food service administration for Waterville and Winslow. In each case, services were improved and costs were lowered for the participating districts. While classrooms remained as they were, support services were reorganized to permit more taxpayer dollars to be put to use in the classroom.

A more ambitious project was pursued by Waterville, which invited its cross-river neighbor, Winslow, to consider a joint high school. Enrollment at both schools has declined, and both have aging facilities. The project had strong support from leading Waterville officials, including Superintendent Eric Haley and Mayor Paul LePage. Education Commissioner Susan Gendron promised state funding for the project, if both communities decided to pursue it. It had less visible backing in Winslow, which as part of Union 52 shares a superintendent with China and Vassalboro. A citizen committee called "Save Our School" put

school that could offer a diversified program.

Still, new partnerships between different districts, even neighboring ones, have become rare in Maine, and Harvey said that, on their own, she's not sure the two could come together and agree to share a school.

As it happens, at the same time the Georges Valley task force was meeting, the public college facilities in the area were undertaking a study that's come to be known as the Many Flags project. The concept, according to Alan Hinsey of Eastern Maine Development Corp., is simple in outline. Nearby centers for the University of Maine system in Thomaston and Belfast and the Kennebec Valley Community College would join with the Region 8 vocational center (which serves both SADs 5 and 50) to create a joint campus with a single administrator and central guidance/counseling office. "They would join together to create the facility, but maintain their autonomy and programs," he said. "That's the many flags part."

Hinsey is clearly intrigued by the idea of adding two high schools to the mix. "Then you could take full advantage of high school students taking college courses," he said. "The availability of programs and choices would be unmatched in the state."

Given the time it's taken to convince the community college and university systems to accomplish even tentative linkages, it might seem that adding secondary schools to the equation would make it even more difficult to assemble a viable project.

Harvey thinks that might not be the case. "By adding the colleges, it becomes a lot more attractive to people. We can encourage aspirations and do what a lot of people now want, and expect, from public education."

In her own district, she's already noticed a significant change in opinion. "When we started the public meetings, a lot of people were questioning why we'd even want to think beyond the boundaries of our district. Now, what we hear is more like, 'Who should we talk to, and how do we get started?' "

A report from a Rockland task force is due in October. Hinsey thinks the two districts are natural partners. "A merger is going to happen sooner or later," he said. "It's only logical, but logic is not what drives these things." The Many Flags project, he said, has the capability of shifting the debate toward what kind of school community could best achieve the region's educational goals, while attracting state funding and reducing costs per student.

"There's no doubt that there's support," he said. "The question is, can we make it happen?"

an advisory referendum question on the ballot in Winslow in November 2005, calling for a $9 million renovation of the high school. Organizers said the non-binding petition was designed to ensure that the school board would not pursue a joint venture with Waterville. The advisory referendum was approved, and the merger discussions have been shelved.

Gouldsboro, Winter Harbor and Steuben

In 2004, Gouldsboro and Winter Harbor formed the Peninsula Bay Community School District (CSD 20), only the second new regional school district agreement signed in the last 30 years, the other being the Five Town CSD (SAD 28: Rockland-Camden, Appleton, Hope and Lincolnville) in 1999.

As a step toward regional cooperation, the Peninsula Bay District was a modest advance given the unusual circumstances involved. Winter Harbor had lost most of the students in its elementary school after the Navy base in town shut down. Gouldsboro had to close down its school in the middle of the 2003-04 school year after toxic mold was discovered, and the children and teachers moved to now-vacant classrooms at the Winter Harbor school. The new school district then applied for, and received, approval from the State Board of Education for a replacement school.

Union 96 Superintendent Donald LaPlante, who serves these two town school boards, and several others, recommended that Steuben join the new CSD. Its aging elementary school has fewer than 100 students, and the building is estimated to need nearly $1 million in renovations, and is not eligible for state funding.

LaPlante's recommendation, which he said was based on students' educational needs, prompted a lengthy and contentious debate in Steuben. The school board unanimously rejected the idea of sending students to the new school, and even opposed putting the question on the ballot.

The selectmen, who supported joining the CSD, nonetheless scheduled a referendum, at which townspeople voted on January 23, 2006 to join the CSD, 180-159. Opponents petitioned for a new vote, however, and on March 6 the town rendered the opposite verdict, voting 357-279 to reject the CSD plan. Gouldsboro and Winter Harbor, which earlier had voted overwhelmingly to allow Steuben to join, now plan to proceed on their own.

Throughout the public debate, the educational aspects of the two school options rarely came up. Proponents of the CSD plan generally supported the financial advantages for the town, while opponents said it was essential to keep Steuben's school open because of its value as a community center. Children's experiences in school were rarely mentioned.

(See also, "A Superintendent's Tale, *page 28)*

Millinocket Area

In January 2003, Great Northern Paper, which had at one time employed 4,000 workers in its Millinocket and East Millinocket mills, declared bankruptcy and abruptly shut down. The towns that had been built literally in the middle of the vast northern forest a hundred years earlier were suddenly faced with the loss of their primary economic base.

The mills have since restarted, with a greatly reduced labor force, under a new company called Katahdin Paper. As with all mills in this declining American industry, their future is uncertain.

The economic emergency prompted equally urgent talks among area municipalities. A significant part of their tax base had seemingly disappeared. Even before the mills shut down, employment had been falling rapidly, and the population of the region also decreased. Stearns High School in Millinocket and Schenck High School in East Millinocket had both lost 30 percent of their students over the previous decade.

In addition to its attempts to restart the mills, the Baldacci administration urged local officials to quickly find ways to cooperate and share public services. The initial talks broke off without agreement, and some observers took away the lesson that even in the most dire circumstances, Maine's often fiercely independent communities cannot find common ground.

That judgment may have been premature. After two years of discussions, and a decision to share a superintendent, the Millinocket School Department and Union 113 (East Millinocket, Medway and Woodville) have moved closer to cooperation. A current initiative would merge arts programs and, surprisingly, athletic teams.

Traditional sports rivalries are often advanced as unspoken but powerful reasons why certain schools will "never" join forces. In the Millinocket area, the interest in sharing teams may result in part because Schenck does not have a football team, while Stearns students don't run cross-country. Yet even formerly fierce rivals, such as Mexico and

Rumford, have learned to live together (in SAD 43), and their teams are more competitive in state tournaments.

Stearns and Schenck already have open membership in their bands and choruses. A recent student survey indicated strong interest in pursuing further shared extracurricular programs. At a public meeting for parents, none of the 55 attending opposed the idea.

SCHOOLS AS AN ECONOMIC MAGNET

Maine has more than 700 schools, and more than 50 centers of higher education. Is it possible that any part of the state is under-served by the existing public education system? The Many Flags/One School project, which focuses on Knox County and the Midcoast area from St. George north to Camden, found that this is indeed the case.

Kennebec Valley Community College in Fairfield serves the area, but is 90 minutes away. Less than 5 percent of KVCC students are from Knox County. The University of Maine System centers in Thomaston and Belfast are seen as welcome "outposts" by area employers, but neither produces the number of trained graduates need to keep the economy growing.

The 10 percent increase in population in the area during the 1990s disguises an exodus of young people during the same decade, a Many Flags survey showed. While Knox County now slightly exceeds state per capita income and the proportion of college degree holders, it has also become "older" than even the state average of 40.2 years. An estimated 29 percent of the 20-35 age group departed during the 1990s.

The solution being touted by Many Flags is "one school," amended from "one college" after public high schools in Thomaston and Rockland showed interest in joining the project. The idea is that the various institutions, including the regional high school vocational center, would find a joint location and administration while retaining their individual identities.

The project aims to link the county's attractive geography and growing number of entrepreneurs with the young people who now leave because a lack of local educational opportunity. The proximity of college programs to high schools in turn can be a means to creating the "high performing schools" that the State Board of Education and the Department of Education have called for in recent reports and initiatives.

To date, the project has determined that KVCC would be primarily responsible for freshman and sophomore courses and associate degree programs, while the University of Maine centers would concentrate on junior and senior levels classes and most baccalaureate programs. The University of Maine's Hutchinson Center, now based in Belfast, would offer graduate programs. The secondary level Midcoast School of Technology would offer technical-vocational training along with adult and community education. Marine trades training would also be provided.

A briefing paper for Many Flags says that, if the high schools in Thomaston and Rockland do decide to join forces, "the best chance for the success of those combined institutions may be as partners on the Many Flags campus."

If the current talks do yield a decision to go forward, a joint task force will be created to consider sites, planning for combined operations, and determining how the proposed campus can function most effectively.

Chapter 5

Cooperatives and Collaboration

Many different forms of regional cooperation are possible. Some involve the formal redrawing of political boundaries and changing institutional arrangements – something that except in unusual times of change can be difficult to accomplish. Even in ideal circumstances, such transformations take careful planning and require significant public input as well as high levels of coordination among elected and appointed officials.

Collaborative efforts, on the other hand, can yield many of the benefits of more formal regional changes, and can be accomplished more quickly and with fewer institutional obstacles, since they leave existing governing structures intact. In addition, they can provide a more comfortable pathway to long-term changes, allowing time to build trust and to experiment with different arrangements, while demonstrating whether the expected educational benefits and cost savings can actually be achieved.

Most states have much larger school districts than Maine, both in terms of geography and the number of students being served. Some of these differences extend back to the founding of each state. In Maine and most New England states, municipalities were the basis for school districts. In much of the rest of the country, the county serves that role. In the short-term, it is difficult to see Maine achieving the average size of school districts nationally, which is four times Maine's current average of 734 students, or what some educators believe to be an optimum size, which is five times greater.

For this reason, cooperative arrangements that fall short of redistricting have an obvious appeal and practicality. This chapter will examine four possible models for such collaboration, including two from other states, Pennsylvania and New Hampshire. Pennsylvania has made regional cooperatives a cornerstone of education policy statewide, while in New Hampshire, districts in the far northern part of the state have supported an educational services consortium for 30 years. (An existing Maine collaborative, the Penobscot Regional Educational Partnership, is described in Chapter 4.)

Two new collaborative efforts in Maine are described here: the Western Maine Education Corp., which spans a large part of the state, and the direct sharing of services by three school districts in central Maine.

The Pennsylvania model is included not because it could be applied directly to Maine – the two states are vastly different in demography and population – but because it represents a well-tested example of what collaborative strategies can achieve. New Hampshire's cooperative functions in only one part of the state and its programs are more limited, but it may look more familiar to Maine citizens considering new ventures. Mainers at least know what a regional, multi-town school district looks like, but they are largely unfamiliar with what a large-scale educational cooperative can do.

Maine has had a small number of other cooperative school arrangements over the years, including purchasing alliances. The new Western Maine effort is comparable in scope to the Pennsylvania system, and can be considered an ambitious attempt to achieve some of the same financial and educational benefits.

Regionalism by Contract

Pennsylvania, like Maine, does not have county school systems. Unlike Maine, it decided to create formal county school cooperatives. The one described here is in Chester County, located in a relatively rural area west of Philadelphia. There are no large cities, and the 12 public school districts are reasonably comparable in size.[16]

The Chester County Intermediate Unit was one of 29 educational cooperatives created by the Pennsylvania Legislature in 1971. It is governed by board of 12 directors – one from each school district – and employs an executive director. It has a budget of $123 million, with 19 percent of revenue coming from the state and 23 percent from federal sources. Most of the local revenue derives from contracted services; district assessments have declined from 13 percent of the budget to 5 percent over the past 10 years. There are 1,000 employees, most of them professional, support and contract staff. Administrative overhead is low – less than 5 percent of personnel are classified as administrators.

By Maine standards, the CCIU is large, if not vast. It serves 68,000 public school students and another 13,000 in private and parochial schools. By contrast, in all of Maine there are just over 200,000 public school students, meaning that Chester County has one-third as many students as Maine. So the range of services offered by the CCIU is probably greater than could realistically be supported here, though the kind of services suitable for regional offerings are probably similar.

The CCIU programs are most comprehensive in special education, offering centralized and itinerant programs for autism, occupational and physical therapy, speech and language, Title I tutoring (reading and math), transportation and support services. The county program includes two regional technical high schools, a career development center and an alternative school.

Some of the CCIU services have often been mentioned for possible Maine regional efforts, including psychological counseling and evaluation, professional development, migrant education, driver's education, food service, Head Start, pre-school programs, and employee contract negotiations.

Others offered by the CCIU extend beyond the current Maine agenda, including public relations consulting, video programming, legal counsel and legislative liaison, SAT preparation, and security and surveillance.

While some services are fully centralized, they represent only about 10 percent of the budget ($11 million). The growth of the "marketplace," or contracted services portion of the budget, now $90 million of the $123 million total, indicates that public school districts, and numerous private schools, find the cost and professionalism of the services offered to be more attractive than providing them on their own.

Rural New Hampshire Joins Together

After collaborating on a cultural arts project in the mid-1960s, several school districts in the far northern part of New Hampshire – the section from the White Mountains north that most resembles rural Maine – formed North Country Education Services in 1969.[17]

Collaborative efforts can yield many of the benefits of more formal regional changes, and can be accomplished more quickly and with fewer institutional obstacles.

A SUPERINTENDENT'S TALE

Union 96

Donald LaPlante, now 56, was a teacher and principal in New Hampshire for most of his career. When, with his children grown, he decided to seek a superintendency, he did not want to stay in the Granite State.

"The Legislature is always trying to cut state aid, and it ignores the (state) Supreme Court," which has ordered greater funding equity, he said. LaPlante looked to Maine, a state where funding was much more available and predictable, as a good place to start.

He came to Union 96, on the Schoodic Peninsula just east of Mount Desert Island, three years ago. Now he is leaving, and he admits to being a frustrated administrator.

Some school unions – separate town districts that share a central office – send students in all directions. Not Union 96. All of its six towns (Sullivan, Sorrento, Franklin, Gouldsboro, Winter Harbor, and Steuben) send their children to Sumner High School and share the union's three elementary schools. In function, the union resembles a regional school district, or SAD, but its administrative structure is quite different.

Unique in the state, Union 96 operates three separate community school districts – one for Sumner High School (Flanders Bay CSD, six towns), another for the K-8 Mountain View School (Schoodic CSD, two towns) and the new K-8 school for the Peninsula CSD (two towns). Steuben has its own elementary school and school board, and Franklin has a school board but no school, sending its elementary students to Mountain View and paying tuition.

There are three school budgets at the elementary level, one for the high school, and another for union expenses – all for 850 students. A study of Union 96's administrative structure called it a "bureaucratic nightmare."

LaPlante doesn't use this phrase but is blunt in his own assessment. "It's worse than ineffective. It's abysmal," he said. "With all these budgets, there's just an endless filling out of state and federal forms. We're always doing the same work, and it's never done."

Nor does his frustration end with local arrangements. When he arrived, Winter Harbor had lost most of its students with the closing of its Navy base. Gouldsboro then lost its school, which had to be shut down in the middle of the year after toxic mold was discovered. The neighboring towns then shared space at the Winter Harbor school before deciding to join in a CSD. It was the only the second new CSD set up in Maine in 30 years, and LaPlante was amazed to discover that there was no well-defined process.

"The state says they're in favor of regionalization, and combining small schools. But we had to pay our own attorneys thousands of dollars just to draw up the papers," LaPlante. The state Department of Education has no staff attorneys, and relies on the Attorney General's office for legal advice, which is not available to local districts. When Steuben was considering joining the Peninsula CSD, the union spent thousands more. "When you call Augusta, you can't get an answer. They just don't have the people," he said, shaking his head.

Steuben operates the 100-pupil, K-8 Ella Lewis School. It is in poor repair, needs nearly $1 million in renovations and was educationally moribund until a popular new principal revived its fortunes. LaPlante recommended, on both educational and financial grounds, that Steuben join the CSD, which would then have 300 students.

The collaborative now has nine school districts as members, seven of them regional School Administrative Units (SAUs) that resemble Maine SADs. Reflecting the fact that New Hampshire supplies state aid amounting to less than 10 percent of most district budgets, formal regionalization has been more extensive in New Hampshire than in Maine. North County member SAUs generally comprise five to nine towns each, and New Hampshire does not recognize the school union arrangements employed in Maine, where separate town school boards share a superintendent. In the northern region, even multi-town regional districts feel the pinch of high property taxes, and this collaborative works by, as its motto says, "promoting excellence in education through cost-effective collaboration."

NCES is governed by a 20-member board of directors, including the superintendents of all member districts, and has a staff of 23, including two psychologists, headed by an executive

After a long and emotional debate, Steuben voters first decided to join, then after a petition for a revote, decided against it. Both votes were close, and the issue appears far from settled. There is no money in the budget for repairs, and the school will not qualify for state renovation fund assistance, yet taxes are going up anyway. Unlike the towns on Mount Desert Island, which have enormous valuation from second home owners, most Schoodic residents have modest incomes, but the area's fast-rising property values reduce state aid.

LaPlante says he understands townspeople's emotional attachment to the school. It's one of the few public buildings in town, and functions as a community center. "I know why they want to keep it, but I don't know if they can afford to," he said.

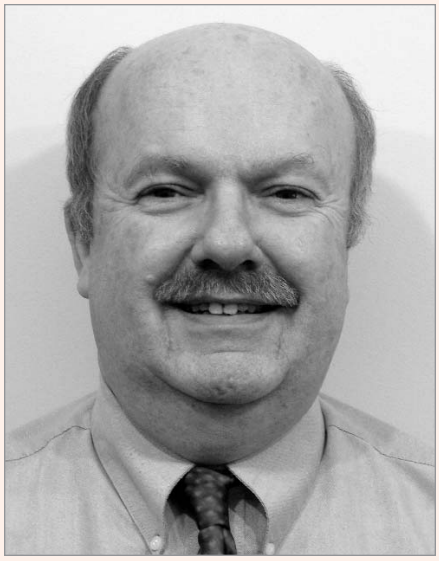
Reorganization of the union could save money and might be a reasonable alternative to closing a school, and LaPlante said the idea of forming an SAD has been talked about. But the retired educator who was pushing the idea has since died, and the discussion lapsed. Franklin, which withdrew from the Schoodic CSD 15 years ago in a financial dispute, is considering rejoining, but that is the extent of current debate.

Like most CSDs, the ones on the Schoodic Peninsula spend well above the state's EPS guidelines. The Flanders Bay budget for the high school is 40 percent above EPS.

Michael Eastman, high school principal, said that if the regional district idea comes up again, he'd speak in favor. While each elementary school is supposed to follow the same curriculum, in practice students arrive at high school with differing levels of preparation.

Ironically, Sumner High School, built in 1952, is an early example of regional cooperation, the first school built by multiple towns in Maine. Now, with multiple wings added to the original structure, it is difficult to find the front door. The building appears ripe for a replacement for its 320 students. But when the CSD filed an application, it ranked so far down the state's list that it didn't even try again.

To outsiders, the benefits of reorganization seem obvious. LaPlante, however, said these towns are not used to working together. He tells a story from a public meeting early in the process that led to Gouldsboro and Winter Harbor joining forces. A questioner commented that, "My grandfather told me you just can't trust people" from the other town. LaPlante followed up, asking the man if he knew the reason for the mistrust. He didn't. He then asked whether the man had any bad experiences himself. He hadn't. Convinced he had a convert, he was chagrined to hear the man say again, "You just can't trust people from that town."



DONALD LAPLANTE

LaPlante's next job will be superintendent of the White River Junction district in Vermont, where, he says, the state department answers his calls and provides prompt answers. "Twenty-three hundred students," he says. "One five-member school board. One budget."

One school administrator seems to have found peace of mind.

director. It benefited from a federal grant for innovative school projects at its inception, but does not currently receive federal funds and is supported primarily by its school district members.

Initially, its services were targeted to professional development and central office functions for members. It later expanded to provide special education services, distance learning, grant administration, and adult education, and has an on-line library. Psychological evaluation and counseling is another key function.

Western Maine Sets the Stage

Maine has several new collaborative efforts that are noteworthy. The Western Maine Education Corp. is taking final steps to become a formal organization. It has applied to

become a non-profit organization capable of receiving federal funding and private donations. As yet largely unknown to the public, WMEC represents an initiative on a scale at least comparable to what Pennsylvania accomplished 35 years ago.

In all, 17 school districts have sought board approval to join the fledgling organization, including municipal school departments, regional SADs and school unions in the region. Representing a vast geographic area spanning four counties, prospective members represent 61 municipalities that educate about 25,000 students, about one-eighth of the state's total enrollment.

Mainers at least know what a regional, multi-town school district looks like, but they are largely unfamiliar with what a large-scale educational cooperative can do.

WMEC membership is motivated by the recognition that limited financial resources, declining enrollment and the natural constraints of small schools make it difficult to meet the needs of all students and in turn to reach the standards set by the Learning Results. Its goals include building a self-sustaining collaborative that serves individual member needs, improves student performance, and maximizes use of existing technology such as the 10-year-old ATM system set up by the University of Maine System. Using this system, schools can extend the reach of their programs and share instruction. They can do this if they are willing to coordinate schedules and train instructors to use the system.

At the moment, the regional cooperative is clearly still a work in progress. What programs can be shared, what non-classroom functions can be provided, are as yet unknown. It is exploring cooperation involving occupational, speech and physical therapy, teacher certification for gifted and talented students, and technology purchases. As in the Pennsylvania model, services will be offered on a per-student basis, billed to the school district, eliminating any thorny questions about cost sharing.

The willingness of so many school districts to participate, in a variety of communities with differing forms of school governance, is a significant event. If the state chooses to invest some of the money earmarked for regional initiatives, this could be an appropriate vehicle for experimentation and innovation.

Central Maine Experiments

Three school districts northwest of Augusta have recognized an emerging conflict between high educational expectations for all students and the declining number of students in most of these schools. Small high schools face particular challenges, and finding new ways to share resources is one means of meeting them. High schools in Jay, Livermore Falls (SAD 36) and Winthrop are the participants in this experiment.

Two years ago, the town of Winthrop needed to hire a new superintendent and approached a former superintendent who was now serving SAD 36 (Livermore and Livermore Falls). In an unusual arrangement, one superintendent was chosen to lead both districts. The two school boards continue to operate independently while establishing a variety of shared administrative positions to maximize resources. Even though the districts are not contiguous and the central offices are about 15 miles apart, distance has not prohibited successful collaboration.

As the experiment took shape, Jay, a neighboring district to SAD 36, has joined the other two districts in identifying common needs, particularly at the secondary level. The three high schools are of similar size. Winthrop has 357 students, SAD 36 has 372 and Jay has 287. With about 1,000 students between them, they can collectively offer some of the programs typically associated only with larger high schools.

One of the most pressing needs was an inability to offer many advanced placement and gifted and talented classes. AP chemistry and physics courses are now offered, after nine months of planning and staff training. Instructors teach in each of the three schools in turn, spending the day with students in one school and teaching the class on the same schedule via ATM links to the other two schools. Instructors from all three districts participate, and receive an additional stipend for course preparation and travel, with the cost shared equally between the three districts.

The first change needed was to align schedules at the different high schools so that classes can be offered simultaneously. This common schedule permits more effective use of the ATM system, so that students can ask questions and have them answered by the instructor as they arise. Other areas targeted for cooperative programs include those where instructors are in high demand, including other math and science courses and the performing arts.

A second experiment among two of these districts involves administrative and non-classroom services. Winthrop and SAD 36 have begun sharing a transportation director, maintenance director, food services, and various central office functions. The SAD 36 board originally budgeted at its EPS allocation for the year, but projected about $134,000 in savings. In fact, $237,000 was saved in the first year of implementation, demonstrating that it is possible to achieve savings without diminishing programs. The two districts have decided to reduce staff positions only by attrition, and there have been no layoffs as a result of these administrative changes.

Other efforts are proceeding. SAD 36 and Winthrop and three neighboring districts, partnering with the University of Maine, are cooperating to research, develop and implement programs for students who have traditionally attended alternative education classes. Two other districts are working on delivery of day treatment for students with significant disabilities that have previously been placed in out-of-state programs.

Another effort, called the "Whatever it Takes" program, had led to a joint summer educational program for middle school students who may be struggling to meet Learning Results standards. The program preserves the current 175-day school calendar while adding summer classes for those who need additional instructional time.

Maine is clearly only at the beginning of determining how much cooperative efforts between schools can achieve.

Cooperative Challenges

Cooperative and collaborative efforts have many attractions. They can save money and expand programs at the same time. But they also require certain prerequisites – similar schedules and calendars – and are often dependent on persistent local leadership. Turnover among superintendents, in particular, is high. This can make it difficult not only to establish cooperative ties, but to maintain them following a change in administrative leadership. Still, Maine is clearly only at the beginning of determining how much cooperative efforts between schools can achieve, and in a rural state where formal regionalization may have limits it is well worth exploring.

To be successful, cooperatives must not only be able to receive federal and private dollars, but have explicit state support and funding. Whether the chosen approach is to create a pilot effort, or to launch cooperatives in all parts of Maine together, state assistance will be key to success. Since the cooperative model is relatively new to Maine, the state will also have to maintain flexibility, and be open to trying different structures that appear promising and have local support.

Chapter 6

Building Bridges, Creating Vision

Schools have many options for pursuing regional cooperation and for joining together to more effectively provide educational services. What they lack is a road map – an outline for how these changes can actually take place, given the very small size of school districts and the lack of a single state educational agency that has been designated to guide change.

This chapter attempts to provide a map, to explain how Maine schools can organize more effectively, while doing justice both to appropriate state goals and to a strong tradition of local control of education.

The key changes must take place first in how the state builds and maintains schools, and second in creating local and regional forums where regional cooperation can be discussed and planned. Our suggestions represent thinking "outside the box," but not that far outside the box. The techniques and innovations recommended here are all based on existing models that have been in use in Maine for decades. What is necessary is to deploy resources, and the considerable energy Mainers bring to improving their schools, into programs that will accomplish the desired ends.

While the Legislature has gradually increased the amount of money available for school construction, it is by no means adequate without major changes in the way schools are planned, designed and built.

A New Chapter in School Construction

Maine currently operates 734 public schools in 290 separate school districts. Since statewide K-12 enrollment has dipped to just over 200,000, Maine's average school size of 275 is lower than it has been in years. Replacing each one of these schools when it becomes outdated is clearly impractical. Construction costs are averaging $30 million for high schools, making this option cost-prohibitive.

Building many small schools is far more expensive than fewer larger ones, since the major expense of construction lies in siting and the building of core facilities that must be present in every school. The long-term operational costs, both for the building and the larger number of staff members needed per student in very small schools, are even more daunting. While the Legislature has gradually increased the amount of money available for school construction, it is by no means adequate without major changes in the way schools are planned, designed and built.

The State Board of Education has responded to this continuing funding crisis by setting as a goal that all new elementary schools should have 350 students and high schools should have 450 students. By national standards, these school sizes are still small, but are larger than the current state medians – about 200 for elementary schools and 400 for high schools.

These standards, however, are likely to be unpopular with school districts in rural and sparsely populated parts of the state. School leaders in rural districts point out that their current enrollments are well below these levels, and falling. Without state assistance, very few of these districts will be financially capable of building new schools, and without adequate schools their local economies will wither, since they no longer will be able to attract young families.

One of the schools on the current "protected list" for funding is Machias High School. With only 130 students, it is not clear how it can meet the State Board's new criteria, although state officials say they are working to find a way. It should be noted that even the "protected list" has never guaranteed a replacement school, only that the state will provide funding and work with local officials on an effective facility.

The answer to this dilemma between current school size and the need for more desirable educational outcomes is to create a new track for regional school projects. This will enable communities to demonstrate effective efforts to cooperate without necessarily being tied to a specific enrollment target.

To see why a new construction program is necessary, we must go back a few years to consider previous ebbs and flows in state policy.

In the 1980s, the State Board approved a number of very small new schools because that is what local communities seemed to want. Several islands built state-of-the-art facilities for enrollments measured in the dozens. Their geographic isolation made other alternatives unlikely.

But many small schools were built elsewhere. In SAD 11, the State Board approved two new elementary schools in Gardiner, one of four municipalities in the district, after a local referendum for a single school was rejected. Since then, enrollments have declined, two other elementary schools in Gardiner have closed, and one of the new elementary schools has never operated at more than half its capacity, while district schools in other towns have unmet needs. The two-school solution, in this case, is one neither the State Board nor the local SAD board would pursue today.

A significant amount of consolidation of very small schools is now taking place, quietly.

Rising costs, falling enrollments

Responding to rising construction costs and falling enrollments, the State Board began moving gradually toward encouraging districts to consolidate existing schools. For example, SAD 74 was placed on the protected list for its Carrabec Community School in North Anson. The State Board declined to fund a replacement for those 150 students. Instead, the local board combined grades from the existing middle school to build a 300-pupil school, which was approved in 2003. In a recent discussion of the new school construction rules, the district's superintendent thanked the State Board for encouraging consolidation, saying that the new school had permitted greater staff development, more effective use of teachers, and improved achievement throughout the elementary grades.[18]

In fact, a significant amount of consolidation of very small schools is now taking place, quietly and without much public comment. The practice of replacing each current building, whatever its size, has been overtaken by financial realities and educational needs.

As part of the 1999-2000 construction funding cycle, Old Town will consolidate four elementary schools into one, and Belfast (SAD 34) plans to replace three elementary schools with one new school. Consolidation also is taking place in Calais, Kennebunk (SAD 70), Lisbon, Dexter (SAD 46) and Anson (SAD 74). In all, eight new schools will replace 20 existing schools. (Due to the long timelines of the existing state construction program, some of these projects are not yet complete.)

From the 2001-02 list, Dixfield (SAD 21) will merge three elementary schools into one, while Waldoboro (SAD 40), Thorndike (SAD 3), Charleston (SAD 68), Hallowell (SAD 16) and Hiram (SAD 55) are also consolidating , with five new schools replacing 10 existing schools.

The current list, which includes Portland, Buxton (SAD 6), Ellsworth, Norridgewock (SAD 54), Ashland (SAD 32), Brewer and Gorham, is in the planning stages, but some

WHERE DISTANCE EDUCATION IS A WAY OF LIFE

Washington County

There have never been many public school students in Washington County, and there are fewer today. The well-known economic straits of Downeast Maine have led to outmigration and lower school enrollments but not yet to significant changes in schools and school districts. The possibility of change, however, is what's behind the state's selection of Machias High School as part of the "protected list" that in the past has usually guaranteed new school construction.

At first glance, there seems to be a discrepancy in numbers. Machias has only 130 students in a building that could easily accommodate more than 200, and has in the past. The State Board of Education has set 450 students as the smallest new high school it would like to see built.

Yet local and state officials express confidence that Machias can come up with a viable plan. The town school department and Union 102 can draw on substantial planning funds from a state bond issue, and the state also sees this as an opportunity to provide southern Washington County with something it has never had – a regional vocational center. Alone among the 26 vocational regions, there is no center, just small, individual programs in Lubec, Eastport, Machias and East Machias. With the county's overwhelming need for a trained workforce to attract new jobs, a new vocational center has become an overriding priority.

Scott Porter, Union 102 superintendent, says that the state would like to see the Machias project, whatever form it takes, use the latest in technology, and be a model for providing secondary education in Maine's most rural areas.

The Washington County situation has also been affected by the aggressive recruiting of a private school, Washington Academy in East Machias, that has attracted students away from Machias and other high schools in the area. Nearly all the towns involved are "school choice" communities; they usually let parents choose any available school and the town pays tuition costs, but not transportation. Union 102 is an apt example. Of its seven towns, only Machias sends all its students to the public high school; nearly half of the remaining students go to Washington Academy, located four miles away.

Porter, who used to teach at the pri-

Under current rules, it is not possible for two districts to jointly petition for a construction project, even if it is educationally justified and meets the state's standards for cost-effectiveness.

schools boards, such as Brewer, have already committed to consolidation, replacing as many as five elementary schools with one K-8 school. In all, it appears likely that nine new schools will replace 22 existing schools.[19]

It is notable that in nearly all these instances, consolidation was not mandated by the State Board, but pursued by local districts as being more cost-effective and providing educational advantages for their students. In nearly all these cases, the old schools had fewer than 200 students, and in some case less than 100.

The need for a more regional approach to school construction becomes clear by looking at needs on a statewide, rather than a school-by-school basis. Only one out of every four project applications now receives state funding, and even those numbers underestimate existing needs. Many superintendents will not recommend the expense of applying for projects that, under the existing rules, they know are unlikely to be funded.

The most recent statewide survey of construction needs based on local input dates from 1996, but a recent update provides a good snapshot of the current situation.[20]

The average cost per school project has risen sharply in recent years, from $5-$7 million as recently as the mid-1990s to nearly $17 million in 2005. This indicates that the State Board has begun the difficult task of replacing high schools rather than the small projects typical of the 1980s and 1990s. It also suggests that funding will quickly prove inadequate if building-for-building replacements are attempted.

vate school, says its recruiting strategy makes sense. "They saw what was happening, and took steps to make sure they didn't have to lay off teachers and cut programs." Like similar schools in towns like Blue Hill, China, Dover-Foxcroft Fryeburg and Saco, at least 80 percent of Washington Academy's students are publicly tuitioned, but it also recruits from as far away as Africa.

Such recruitment from an already small number of students makes investment in new public schools problematic, but Machias has taken steps to level the playing field.

"We were 110th in the MEA scores among 120 high schools," Porter said. "We had to change." After having five principals in five years, Machias hired Tim Reynolds, who after four years has turned the school around. The last MEA scores at Machias were 20th in the state.

"We've aligned our program with the Learning Results, and created a core curriculum," said Reynolds. About a quarter of the existing classes – many of them electives and old-style business courses – were cut, and the school has found a way to challenge seniors who are only marking time in many high schools. Fully two-thirds of this year's seniors are taking classes at the nearby University of Maine at Machias campus, and will enter college next year with credits already on their transcript. "The shuttle bus runs all day long," Reynolds said. "It's become more popular than we'd ever expected."

The Machias K-8 school is on the same campus, so shared recreational facilities and a location near downtown increase the high school's attractiveness. "When we're talking to potential new students, facilities are always at the top of their list," Reynolds said.

So far, the high school and vocational school project is shaping up as a magnet school more than one that would encompass any formal consolidation, which is in keeping with most town attendance policies. Still, some of the state's smallest high schools are within busing distance of Machias, including Lubec (49 students) and Jonesport-Beals (92). "Maybe we try a school-within-a-school," Scott Porter muses. "Same campus, but separate classes."

All sides want to avoid a repeat of the scenario of SAD 31 in Howland, where Penobscot Valley High School made it onto the state's protected list but was denied construction funding because of declining enrollment.

It may take some doing, but there is optimism that Washington County can build secondary programs that can help boost its fortunes. The consensus seems to be that if the state wants it to happen, it will happen.

A Bridge Next Door

While consolidation of very small schools is being embraced by numerous local school boards, there have been no agreements to join forces across existing school district lines – and Maine school districts are also very small, averaging only 734 students. There is an obvious reason for the lack of any such cooperation, even where it seems to have major advantages: the State Board rules do not permit it.

Under current rules, it is not possible for two districts to jointly petition for a construction project, even if it is educationally justified and meets the state's standards for cost-effectiveness. While state officials suggested that a regional high school for Waterville and Winslow could qualify for state funding, there is in fact no procedure by which two separate municipalities can apply. An existing district would presumably have to draft the application, and the state could grant a waiver for another district to participate. But there are no agreed-upon standards for considering such projects, and given the long wait from application to construction – up to six years — there seems little reason for school districts to pursue this route.

SAD 50 in Thomaston and SAD 5 Rockland have discussed a joint high school project, but have taken no action in the absence of a defined state process for regional application.

The state should provide that process. Currently, school projects can receive funding under two separate programs. One, the needs-based new project list, is the most familiar and has been operating, with modifications, for several decades. Since the mid-1990s, there

It is time to make schools, superintendents, and school boards work as one team.

has also been a renovation fund to overhaul existing buildings, where appropriate. It has enabled districts to maintain downtown schools and older but functional buildings. The fund, created and replenished through two General Fund bond issues, is nearly out of money and will need another bond issue or alternative funding source to continue operating at a significant level.

Rather than attempt to revamp or combine the two existing programs, a third, regional cooperation program, should be created. It would place a high value on cooperative effort, not just on enrollment numbers, and it could offer other advantages over the existing process. The state should offer effective incentives to participation by offering a streamlined process and a greater chance of success. Allocating funds for a regional program is fully justified, and fair to other school districts, because it removes existing barriers to cooperation and creates educational improvement and financial efficiency, freeing up resources that can be made available to other schools.

The idea of the state acting on its own to prescribe new district lines is a non-starter.

The State Board would have to write new rules governing the process. Over time, existing districts would be asked to realign around the school facilities they have created. The expectation should be that district lines would eventually coincide with their largest shared facility – usually grades 9-12, or 7-12. The enormous inefficiencies of existing arrangements involving numerous town school boards, or the overlapping jurisdictions and multiple boards of community school districts, suggest that it is time to make schools, superintendents, and school boards work as one team.

Staying together

On the other side of the coin, the state must make a greater effort to keep existing regional districts together. Over the last 20 years, nearly two dozen withdrawals from regional districts have been approved by the Department of Education, usually on the basis of short-term financial advantage by the withdrawing municipality. Yet such withdrawals create increased costs for all the remaining towns in the district, and drive up overall costs for taxpayers at both the state and local level. It also harms educational opportunity for Maine's children.

Existing legislation essentially requires that the Education Commissioner approve withdrawal if any member town requests it. The Legislature should rewrite the statute to make it clear that withdrawals should be based on educational, not financial, considerations. In short, under state law it is difficult to create regional ties, but easy to end them. Here, too, the state must quickly realign its school district rules to match its goals for regional cooperation.

Evaluating needs under a regional construction program would take into account, as the state does now, the condition of existing buildings. But it would place greater emphasis on the number of students served, and especially on the number of communities and districts participating. This would go a long way toward answering the legitimate concern that it is far more difficult to organize a 450-student high school in Washington County than it is in Cumberland County. It may not be possible for every part of Maine to have high schools capable of offering a truly comprehensive curriculum – which may require 700 or more students – but all regions can benefit from cooperation to achieve educational benefits.

There is little doubt, however, that a larger median high school size would have significant benefits in offering a broader curriculum with greater choices for students. There

would also be more space for each student, a major benefit even at the elementary level. Because Maine builds schools much smaller than average, it attempts to hold down costs with smaller classrooms and common areas. Even a modest increase in average school size would allow Maine to build schools closer to the national norm, and provide more space for each student to learn.

Taking Planning Seriously

Many of Maine's school districts are inadequately organized to meet contemporary reporting requirements of the state and federal governments, let alone administer an appropriate education for their students. Some school boards supervise only a few dozen students; some towns have no schools but maintain school boards and pay administrative costs all the same.

While numerous studies show that larger districts have numerous educational and financial advantages, there has been no significant movement toward forming them since the Sinclair Act subsidies expired in the 1960s.

There needs to be a way that every district, all over Maine, can fairly consider the advantages, and the tradeoffs, from cooperating with neighbors on a variety of regional options.

The idea of the state acting on its own to prescribe new district lines is a non-starter. Simply saying that 35 districts are better than 290 districts does not move Maine closer to achieving this outcome, even if one agrees it is desirable.

Instead, we can take a cue from the Sinclair Act and the locally based process it supported, suitably updated for the conditions present a half-century later. That landmark legislation supplied a 10 percent bonus in state subsidies to towns willing to join together into a single school district. At the time, GPA was much more modest than it is today, and considerably less entangled by decades of infighting over exactly how many state dollars should flow to one district vs. another.

Now, an EPS system has been adopted that has the potential to stem the squabbling and supply a more objective standard for what each municipality should raise to supports its schools, and how much the state should contribute. It will be several years before EPS can really be said to have been accepted as the benchmark for local and state contributions, although the state could speed the process by supplying a more direct and simple explanation of its basic principles. There are three parts: a local contribution measured by a designated tax rate raised for education; state funding for the balance, up to the EPS target, and optional local dollars for any additional spending. Any district spending less than EPS in effect gets a bonus from state subsidies that can be used for school programs or tax relief. Those that spend more must raise the additional dollars on their own.

Because of this history, it appears unlikely that a renewed Sinclair Act subsidy bonus would be an acceptable departure from EPS standards, nor should it be necessary. The savings resulting from regional cooperation, formal or informal, can be so dramatic that school districts should see fit to undertake them on their own.

Still, the state can assist the process considerably, both through regional-friendly construction rules, as outlined above, and through financial assistance.

Under LD 1, the Legislature is supposed to set aside 2 percent of GPA funding to promote regional solutions. To date, most of this money has been diverted to "transitional aid" to districts receiving less money under the EPS/tax effort system. This decision ignored the clear

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intent of the referendum and the resulting law: to get schools and school districts to work together for mutual benefit.

By 2008-09, about $20 million should be available for regional projects. In addition to encouraging regional construction, the state can offer direct support for districts that are willing to create formal ties, as well as those joining regional services cooperatives, as outlined in Chapter 5. Planning and implementation grants should cover all the steps necessary to create new or realigned districts.

Offering assistance, though, may not be sufficient. If the state cannot mandate new districts, and few existing school boards are likely to find the path to regional cooperation on their own, what can be done?

We suggest a coordinated planning process that will begin regionally and, ultimately, lead to a statewide plan for the most effective deployment of educational resources.

Any district spending less than EPS in effect gets a bonus from state subsidies that can be used for school programs or tax relief.

A planning council model

A number of models for educational regions have been suggested, including counties (16), labor markets (31) and Senate districts (35). We prefer the 26 regional vocational districts, which are similar in number, but have the great advantage of being functioning, cooperative educational units. They were formed in the 1960s when technical offerings were thought to be lacking in Maine schools, and continue to operate today in all parts of Maine, though often out of the educational limelight.

In every instance, they involve multiple school districts, and students travel to attend half- or all-day classes. The vocational centers face many of the same challenges as districts considering sharing resources for high schools, special education, transportation or food service. All the vocational regions involve at least 2,000 students, although in York and Cumberland County they number as many as 20,000. Since they were set up to permit a regional center to operate, transportation distances and times are reasonable, should that particular region choose a plan for formal collaboration on school facilities.

It is important not to create an additional layer of educational bureaucracy, however. School planning councils based on the vocational regions should be just that – a temporary, ad hoc group charged with drawing up a regional services plan, which then can be adopted, modified, or rejected by the existing districts involved.

An outline of how a school planning council could work follows. To be effective, council membership should comprise three elements:

1 - School and municipal officials from the region, chosen by a caucus of these leaders.
2 - Public members, chosen by an open process. These members could be parents, business leaders, retired educators, or any other citizens with a keen interest in educational issues.
3 - Professional staffing, with at least one full-time person, funded through the state's GPA contributions, to act as liaison to the Department of Education and to other school planning councils, as needed.

Planning councils would have no more than two years to complete their work, and would be expected to present plans for ratification well before the end of their tenure.

The agenda for each council would be constructed individually, because each part of Maine has different needs and traditions, and prescribing one single approach will not

work for the same reason that prescribing a certain number of school districts is bound to fail.

It is possible, though, to envision some of the topics all councils would need to address. At a minimum, they should consider distance learning and other technologies that can expand the classroom in new dimensions. They would examine how to make transportation work so that bus rides are of reasonable length, routes are well organized, energy is used efficiently and school programs are supported and not hindered. Other non-classroom functions, including collective bargaining, food service, building and equipment maintenance, and purchasing can be pursued regionally with or without formal ties between schools and school districts.

Special education is a major dilemma for many districts, which face difficult choices between hiring specialists for a few students or using costly out-of-district placements. Regionalized services have great potential on a scale larger even that that of a typical SAD.

Staff development and professional seminars represent another pressing need that could be offered regionally.

Cooperation with municipal departments that offer similar services in all these areas should also be on the agenda. Municipal officials are often willing to join forces with school administrators for mutual benefit.

School planning councils are a new idea for Maine, but they are not as unfamiliar as might be supposed. Maine has long supported regional planning commissions and councils of government in all parts of the state, agencies that provide technical assistance and planning expertise to member municipalities, and have boards composed of municipal officials. A school planning council would simply extend this tradition to educational issues.

In another respect, the school councils would resemble charter commissions for towns, cities and counties, which are elected to revise basic governing arrangements for their respective local and regional governments. Except for the seats reserved for school and municipal officials, the selection process could follow the example of charter commission elections for the municipalities within each region.

Planning commissions should be large enough to be representative, but not so large as to have difficulty reaching consensus. Nine members seems a reasonable number, and would permit formation of subcommittees to study particular issues.

School planning councils make sense for a variety of reasons. They would provide a fresh start on issues that have long divided and perplexed both state and local education officials. They can help build the bridges between the state and local school districts that must exist for regional solutions to be properly considered. They avoid the dilemma that now occurs when towns, one by one, decide to close a school or try to maintain it, even in spite of declining enrollment or dwindling financial resources. As we have seen, existing regional school districts can operate some very small schools, when desired by member communities, and remain efficient because they share resources for other joint facilities. Councils should fully explore the advantages of regional cooperatives, which have proven effective in other states.

By pooling the capabilities of several communities operating together, the councils can develop plans showing how to realize advantages of scale while still maintaining local services where they are particularly valued. They can create a vision necessary for neighboring towns to redefine their sense of the best school community, which is one that is designed for the maximum benefit of the children Maine is seeking to educate. It is the children's interests that must be paramount in our decisions about how to increase educational opportunity in Maine without exacting burdensome new costs.

Special education is a major dilemma for many districts, which face difficult choices between hiring specialists for a few students or using costly out-of-district placements.

Chapter 7

Recommendations

The design, organization and delivery of educational services is a complex process with a long history in Maine. Fundamental change is rare, but the opportunity and need for such change has arrived. The state's increased responsibility for financing public schools, and its new system for doing so, demands more effective structures for guiding education at the state level, for governing schools at the local level, and for increasing cooperation at all levels. Without improved organization, the public is likely to be disappointed both with their schools' educational performance, and with the amount of reduction in property taxes that was a key goal of the 2004 referendum and the legislation passed in response.

It has been 50 years since the Sinclair Act, and some would say public education structures are overdue for reassessment. This report attempts to begin that reassessment regarding school governance and school organization, and concludes that a strong dose of regional cooperation is the best option for ensuring that the public's high expectations are not disappointed.

Its recommendations are presented in two parts: First, there is a general statement of what needs to be done and how some of the basic steps can be accomplished. Second, the recommended tasks are broken down into detailed assignments for the various agencies responsible for schools, so that each level of educational leadership is identified with particular outcomes. It will not escape notice that there is plenty of work for everyone to do.

Design for Regional Cooperation

- For Maine schools to cooperate effectively, THEY NEED TO BE ON THE SAME PAGE. The state must create a model statewide school calendar that can be adopted at the local level. A lack of such coordination not only makes it unlikely for future regional cooperation to occur, but harms existing regional programs, such as the vocational schools. Daily schedules are more suited to local decision-making, but they should at least be coordinated regionally where common class attendance is the goal.
- In a regional school district, MEMBERSHIP SHOULD BE CONSIDERED A BINDING CONTRACT on all parties. Withdrawals from districts should not be routinely approved by the state, as they are now under existing statute. To gain approval, a withdrawing municipality should have to show educational benefits for its students.
- REGIONAL DISTRICTS SHOULD BE NAMED. The existing numbers follow no recognizable pattern and are difficult to remember, even by educators. They should be replaced with a name identifying each regional district Some SADs have already done this; all should.
- The state SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION PROGRAM NEEDS TO BE REVAMPED. Since schools are built to last at least 50 years, it is important that each project represent a wise investment by state and local taxpayers, and reflect a long-term plan for the effective education of each community's students. Existing programs for new construction and renovations need to be supplemented by a new program specifically designed for regional and multi-district school plans.

- The state should AUTHORIZE CREATION OF REGIONAL COOPERATIVES as requested by local school officials. The cooperatives should be eligible for state funding under the regional grants called for in LD 1.
- The state should CREATE SCHOOL PLANNING COUNCILS ON A REGIONAL BASIS, following the example of the existing 26 vocational centers. The councils would have broad public representation and participation, a limited lifespan, and should be charged with a thorough exploration of regional options that can result in a plan to be ratified by existing school agencies. They would receive state funding, hire a staff member, and receive technical assistance necessary to create their own plan and coordinate with neighboring regions.
- The Department of Education's staffing has not been extensively reviewed for many years. THE DEPARTMENT, WITH LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT, NEEDS TO BE STUDIED to ensure that the Department is capable of carrying out its current responsibilities, and those that will arise in overseeing new arrangements resulting from regional initiatives.
- The Learning Results initiative is still incomplete a decade after its formal inception. THE STATE SHOULD USE THE CURRENT LEARNING RESULTS MORATORIUM YEAR to determine whether all schools in Maine are capable of achieving the standards called for, and if not, what changes must be made to ensure equal opportunity for all students in achieving these standards.
- All-day kindergarten programs are common in Maine, and pre-school programs are also being added to many schools. The state should ENCOURAGE COORDINATION OF SUCH EFFORTS, and complete its study of how to integrate the early childhood special education services now offered through Child Development Services into schools statewide.
- Coordination of K-12 schools with public institutions of higher education is vital. High schools, community colleges, and university campuses SHOULD EXPLORE ALL POSSIBILITIES FOR FORMAL INTERACTION.
- Regional initiatives can produce significant savings, as documented in this report. SAVINGS ACHIEVED BY EACH SCHOOL DISTRICT SHOULD BE AVAILABLE for use as local citizens see fit, to further improve educational offerings, reduce property taxes, or a combination of both.

Stakeholders and Their Roles

The responsibilities for more effective structures in public education sometimes overlap, and the tasks outlined below are not necessarily the exclusive province of any one group or institution. But identifying a source of leadership for change is important, and that is what this section attempts to do.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

- COMPLETE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EPS SYSTEM, particularly its special education components, and determine any necessary changes based on the first two years of experience with the system.

- DETERMINE THE ADEQUACY OF EXISTING RESOURCES FOR SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION, and commission a new survey of statewide needs, checked against the requirements set forth in the Learning Results. Write a capital budget for the next 20 years.
- COORDINATE THE SCHOOL PLANNING COUNCILS, and prepare a statewide education plan based on the results of the local plans.
- Following legislative approval, ADOPT RULES THAT WILL CREATE A NEW STANDARD FOR MEMBERSHIP in, and withdrawals from, regional school districts. The standard should be educational adequacy, not financial convenience.
- DEVISE A MODEL SCHOOL CALENDAR that can be applied statewide.
- COMPLETE STUDY OF LEARNING RESULTS, and propose revisions that can be achieved by all students based on regional norms.
- COORDINATE EFFORTS AND COMPLETE A PLAN for comprehensive pre-school services.

LEGISLATURE

- CARRY OUT THE PROVISIONS OF LD 1 that establish funding for regional initiatives. In the 122nd Legislature, this money was diverted to "transitional aid" for school districts. The regional funding must be fully restored in 2007.
- ENACT LEGISLATION THAT AUTHORIZES COOPERATION on a local and regional basis. Legislation may be required to establish planning councils, fund a regional construction program, coordinate pre-school initiatives, support regional collaboratives, and achieve the goal of "seamless" connections between public school and public colleges and universities.
- REQUIRE THAT REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS BE NAMED, not numbered.
- SET AN EDUCATIONAL, NOT FINANCIAL, STANDARD for changes in regional district membership.
- RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO MICROMANAGE the Department of Education and State Board of Education. School professionals need flexibility to carry out state goals, and the Legislature's oversight role should focus on the goals, not the details of implementation.
- AUTHORIZE A STUDY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S ORGANIZATION and staffing adequacy.

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

- REWRITE THE RULES FOR THE STATE SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION PROGRAM to reflect its determination that larger minimum sizes for new schools should be encouraged.

- In cooperation with the Department of Education, CREATE A REGIONAL CONSTRUCTION PROGRAM that would allow and encourage inter-district proposals, and reward efforts to cooperate among school districts of all sizes.
- SERVE AS ADVOCATES FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION in the larger community that must become better informed about school issues.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

- EXERCISE LEADERSHIP concerning the need for changing institutional arrangements, from the relatively small-scale (school calendars and schedules) to the large (undertaking joint ventures with other districts).
- PARTICIPATE IN THE SCHOOL PLANNING COUNCILS and act as liaisons to other school districts.
- EXPLAIN EXISTING AND EMERGING STATE POLICIES to their school boards and to the public.

SCHOOL BOARDS

- SERVE ON SCHOOL PLANNING COUNCILS with an awareness of how state and local policies can fit together, rather than clash.
- BE WILLING TO RE-EXAMINE INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS, including their own, with an eye to increasing educational opportunities for students while understanding the concerns of taxpayers.

MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

- PARTICIPATE in the regional planning process.
- BE WILLING TO DISCUSS SERVICE-SHARING ARRANGEMENTS with schools, including regional districts, where applicable.
- RESPECT THE EXPERTISE AND UNIQUE ROLE OF LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS, while sharing their own knowledge and experience.

THE PUBLIC

- KEEP AN OPEN MIND ABOUT SCHOOL REFORM. Existing policies may be inadequate to achieving the goals of providing a sound education for each student in Maine that leads to success in higher education, employment, and life. Everyone must remember that it is children, not the adults making the decisions about them, whose interests we are all trying to serve.

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Maine Children's Alliance

303 State Street • Augusta, Maine 04330
(207) 623-1868 • FAX (207) 626-3302
www.MeKids.org