

## Where Next? School District Reorganization in Maine One Year Later

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For the past year, thousands of Maine citizens and educators have spent tens-of-thousands of person-hours “reorganizing” school districts at the behest of the Governor, Legislature, and Commissioner of Education. Their efforts represent the latest in 25 years of state initiatives designed to improve the quality – and now the efficiency – of Maine’s PreK-12 public education system. Where does the effort stand after one year? What challenges is it facing? What are the prospects that these efforts will bear fruit?

This report finds that reorganization efforts will be more likely to succeed if:

1. the educational benefits of Reorganization are made clear and believable;
2. the financial benefits of Reorganization are made clear and believable;
3. timelines and planning requirements ensure that local citizens are amply informed and consulted prior to the “up-or-down” votes to approve plans;
4. local citizens are assured that they will still have a say over the school budgets that determine their tax bills and school programs for their children and grandchildren;
5. educators are given a role in planning the educational changes that will accompany Reorganization and in helping to explain these to parents, taxpayers, and citizens;
6. the state provides clear incentives for Reorganization and delivers high-quality technical and procedural support to districts; and
7. state officials take steps to rebuild their credibility as leaders of this and other educational efforts.

The observations in this document are informed by my reading of reorganization documents from the Maine Department of Education, news articles, and an interim report on selected Reorganization Planning Committees (Fairman et al. 2008); by my ongoing contact with a variety of Maine educators and citizens; and by my experience as a participant and consultant in the effort.

### **Where Are We After One Year?**

A great deal of time and effort have been expended by many people first to understand the law, then to understand their own districts, and finally to ascertain if and how districts might be combined. MDOE has been deluged with questions and requests for information, requiring extensive data development and definition of terms (for which the law firm of Drummond and Woodsum has been continuously employed). Reorganization Planning Committees (RPCs) have submitted reports of their progress to the Department of Education in place of the full plans originally envisioned in the law.

The state's original set of planning and implementation deadlines has come and gone. The legislature has invested more time and energy in revising the law, adjusting requirements to permit smaller, more locally-responsive structures (AOS's), and setting new implementation timetables. The petition effort to repeal the law continues and is within a few thousand signatures of its goal. Uncertainties resulting from these events have discouraged RPCs from meeting until, as one citizen put it, "They [in Augusta] know what they want from us".

As of July 25, 2008, two reorganization plans had been submitted to MDOE and approved. Reorganization Planning Committees in most SAUs have begun to meet again following a third series of workshops conducted by Drummond and Woodsum to clarify implementation steps now revised to reflect legislative and administrative changes.

All in all, implementation of the law has been uneven across the state and on-and-off through the 14 months since the original law was passed. It has attracted commitment and effort in some locales and very little commitment and effort in others. Clearly, the effort has not gone according to plan. That is hardly unexpected given the magnitude of the task and the mixed feelings many Mainers have about it.

### **What Challenges Face The Effort?**

What are the major issues that have made the road to reorganization twist and turn so? Some of these issues result from differences of philosophy, including outright disagreement with the premise of reorganization. Some from political conflicts. Others from procedural uncertainties and lack of reliable information. And still others from the enormity of the task itself and the absence of logistical and informational supports. Going forward, if reorganization is to in fact improve the quality and efficiency of our schools, we as local citizens and as a state must confront and address the following seven challenges:

1. Too much to do, too little time (and expertise) to do it.

Handing the task of district reorganization to local citizens and expecting them to organize themselves, collect relevant information, use that information to form a constructive plan and to gain referendum approval – all in 12 – 18 months – has proven to be an impossible task in all but a few regions. As of July, 2008, only two plans for new districts have been submitted and approved. In most of the other 44 proposed regions (excluding the 34 existing SAUs large enough to continue as is), Reorganization Planning Committees have become so overburdened that progress has been slow, intermittent, or non-existent.

These issues, among others, have made the work unexpectedly complicated for RPCs:

- ❖ How much of the new district budget will each town pay? (some towns will pay less than they currently do while others will pay more);
  - ❖ How will new district-wide pay scales be affordable within the new spending limits?
  - ❖ Will the new district board have total authority over all things? If not, how will governance be shared with local school committees? People are especially concerned about losing a say over:
    - The budget (and their own and their neighbors' tax bills)
    - Hiring school personnel
    - The educational program
    - The co-curricular activities
    - School improvements
  - ❖ How will votes on the regional board be assigned to each existing town or SAU? Will my town's voice be counted fairly?
  - ❖ Who will own our school property? Who will assume existing school debt?
  - ❖ What assurances can be made to protect traditions, practices, citizens' voices, good programs in our school? In fact, to protect the existence of our community school?
  - ❖ Will current school choice arrangements continue?
2. "This is not worth the effort.": The benefits are unclear or non-existent; no incentives accompany the law.

Lorie LaChance, Executive Director of the Maine Development Foundation and past state economist, states that "regionalization is hard work... It requires incentivizing to change behaviors. Towns are not going to put up their own money to establish new [patterns of cooperation without being firmly convinced of their worth.] It's not for the faint of heart... [Regionalization] takes time." (7/28/08 Maine Public Radio interview) Indeed, the Sinclair Act handsomely rewarded towns that formed SADs with a 10% permanent boost in state education funding and the promise of paying 100% of the construction costs of new regional schools. It required 15 years of sustained effort to form most of today's School Administrative Districts and Community School Districts.

No such financial support accompanies this law. The state has not clearly shown how, if at all, children, schools, and communities will benefit from district reorganization. In fact, the law appears to reduce benefits -- cutting special education, transportation, maintenance, and central office services while offering no reliable data or advice on how to do so in ways that will not harm educational quality. Many citizens and educators support the goal of saving money but do not buy the state's mandates in part because they are unsupported by clear reasoning and by financial support. [Indeed, research presented by the state in support of the reorganization law is neither

comprehensive nor convincing; research on district size nationwide provides no clear mandate for this law.]

3. Schooling will be standardized and unresponsive to our community and my child.

An earmark of American public education has always been its responsiveness to the parents and citizens who directly benefit from – and pay for -- our schools. As Ted Sizer put it, it is “a fundamental American freedom” that parents have a voice in what their children are taught in schools. “Abrogation of this right by central governments,” he went on, “is an abridgement of freedom.” (quoted in Conley, 2003, p. 187)

The formation of larger districts, and with it the prospect of removing decision-making and schools themselves from communities, threatens the vital connection of community to school that brings with it the “right” that citizens feel to shape their school to meet their goals and values. Looming on the horizon is schooling that is standardized by the state, the federal government, and a distant school board. With it comes the fear that a school run by “people I don’t know” in a location “outside of town” will not understand my child or be responsive to my interests.

4. Lack of understanding of district-level administration; uncertainties about district leadership.

Much of the rhetoric around the reorganization law initially focused on having “too many superintendents, too much administration”. State leaders have for years voiced concerns about the quality and supply of superintendents. The Commissioner of Education and members of the State Board of Education reportedly have said that reducing the number of superintendents was a strategy to improve the quality of superintendents.

At the local level, superintendents and other central office personnel such as curriculum coordinators, business managers, and special education administrators are the least visible of school district employees. Their work is not readily accessible to most members of the public; we are not sure what they contribute to schooling when we compare them to teachers and principals and even to custodians and bus drivers. The reorganization process has added to this confusion by assigning superintendents no clear roles in the transition. This has removed a source of potential leadership from the process and further contributed to the impression that “superintendents don’t matter”.

In fact, superintendents and other central administration have become more essential to effective schooling in recent decades as state and federal governments have inserted themselves into the education process (Conley, 2003). More positions have been added. The emphasis on accountability for learning and teaching has made it even more important that talented educators occupy these positions. Ironically, just when superintendents and other district administrators are becoming more involved in educational leadership,

Maine's reorganization law is enlarging their roles and responsibilities over more schools and more towns. Particularly challenging for superintendents will be the development of new regional districts that citizens, educators, and students can trust and identify with – and doing this with fewer resources.

5. Losing the opportunity to participate in and make decisions over local schools

Mainers take for granted their right to determine the shape and form of their own schools and the levels to which they will fund them. In the 1960s and '70s, half of Maine community school boards were terminated and replaced by regional SAD and CSD boards. The prospect of losing their voice in school and budgetary affairs as larger RSU boards are formed is deeply disturbing to many Mainers.

The greatest losses in this regard will come in those parts of the state where larger districts do not exist – in the rural and generally poorer regions of Western, Northern, and Eastern Maine. The state's virtual "outlawing" of School Unions (a more common type of district in these parts of Maine) is taken as an outright assault on the judgment of local citizens and educators. These are communities where citizens already feel disenfranchised and "under the gun" from economic struggles and loss of population. Many also view the EPS funding formula as prejudicial against smaller, rural units and they bring this resentment and distrust with them to the "Reorganization Table".

6. Citizen and educator distrust of government's ability to make wise educational choices for them.

Citizens and educators in many communities are suspicious of state (and federal) intrusions into the affairs of their schools. These suspicions are widely and often very openly communicated. They reflect the unprecedented nationwide effort since 1980 by states and the federal government to assert new quality indicators, new funding arrangements, new assessment and teaching standards, and new accountability measures over individual schools (Conley, 2003, Chapter 3).

Even though they might agree with the goals of these new initiatives, many citizens and educators do not believe that "the state knows how to educate my children better than I/we do." Many simply do not trust that Augusta or Washington can make better decisions about children and their learning than they themselves can. Millions of dollars are spent annually in Maine for testing, curriculum alignment, and state reporting systems that appear to have no tangible educational value to parents, citizens, and many educators. This overarching lack of credibility severely hampers the reorganization effort.

7. The missing voices of professional educators; and little consideration of educational quality and how it will be effected.

Teachers and principals have been given no place at the table in reorganization discussions. (Superintendents, as I note in #4 above, haven't either, but they often have been quietly involved.) Reorganization work has proceeded as if it has no bearing on educational practices and conditions in schools. Teachers and principals, as a result, express deep concerns, frustration, and anger about the reorganization effort's purposes, methods, and anticipated outcomes. I hear very hostile sentiments aimed at all levels of state government. Educators' usual response to the confusion of information and rumor that trickles into schools is to do "damage control" to protect the kids, the school, and ourselves.

We know from decades of research on effective schools and school reform that these sentiments are very likely hampering Maine's efforts to improve the quality – and equity – of education for all children (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Cuban 2003, Noddings, 2007). Michael Fullan, whose report to the MDOE (Fullan and Watson, 2006) has been used to substantiate reorganization by the Commissioner of Education, argues in his report to the state that the formation of "lateral" educator connections across district boundaries should be the focal point of new efforts to raise the quality of teaching and learning across Maine. Such professional collaborations – and the whole concept of regional educational service arrangements – have not even been "on the table" in most reorganization discussions.

### **What are Our Prospects for the Future?**

Looking forward, it will be the citizens of each Maine town, SAD, and CSD who will decide whether and how to reorganize. Reorganization Plans must be approved by vote of all existing School Committees AND by referendum vote of each town's/SAD's/CSD's citizens. This means that plans must make sense to "local folks" – they must address the fears and answer the doubts I have described above.

What does that mean? It means that plans developed by Reorganization Planning Committees might make a lot of sense to the Committees but little sense to voters or even School Committees. RPCs, then, must pay careful attention to how they assemble their plans and how they keep the public and the education community in the loop. A plan written by a few people without ample opportunity to inform and be informed by the voting publics of Maine is very likely to encounter resistance and risk defeat. The threat of financial penalties might scare some voters to vote "yes" on a plan, but voters who are forced to vote "yes" against their better judgment will become nay-sayers and non-supporters who will drag down the implementation of a new district.

Based on this analysis, seven strategies appear necessary if the reorganization effort is to result in the educational and fiscal benefits described in the law's original eight goals. RPC members, School Committees, and the State would be well advised to:

1. Make the educational benefits of this new system very clear and very convincing:
  - a. Show how cost-savings will not undercut what Mainer's want and expect from their local schools.
  - b. Show how new district administration will serve the interests of all children and all taxpayers.
2. Address the widespread belief that "this won't save us any money" by making public well-supported, clear procedures for greater efficiency that will not compromise the quality of education.
3. Relax further the timelines for implementation so that RPCs and School Committees can:
  - a. educate citizens about proposed changes;
  - b. gather and draw on their input; and
  - c. make well-informed decisions that create new ways of doing business with benefits that are clear and well-supported.
4. Make clear how local citizens will be able to influence educational and budget decisions under the new structure. How will the new administration be accountable for high quality education to each town and its taxpayers?
5. Engage teachers, principals, and other staff in the development of the educational components of Reorganization Plans. Give them a place at the table so that they can be assured and assure parents and children that the quality of learning necessary to attain Maine's Learning Results will not be compromised.
6. The state provide incentives for reorganization and support SAUs in their efforts through technical and procedural support and by enlisting superintendents and other leaders as part of the strategy.
7. The Governor and Maine Department of Education take steps to bolster their credibility as leaders of this effort so that all communities in all regions of the state see reorganization as a strategy to strengthen education for children and to support the sustainability of Maine communities – two prominent goals of the Brookings Report that helped give rise to this effort.

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