

School Consolidation Picture Not as Rosy as State Paints

by Stephen Bowen

Readers of this newspaper on Aug. 22 were probably surprised to learn that, according to the Maine Department of Education, "half of Maine students" now attend schools in "consolidated districts."

Surprise is justified when one considers that just a single Regional School Unit, RSU 1 in Bath, is actually up and running.

Voters have approved only two other reorganization plans, which combined will serve little more than 4,000 students.

Madison voters rejected a third consolidation plan, in southern Somerset County, in June.

So how do state officials get away with claiming that "half" of Maine's approximately 197,000 students are in consolidated districts?

They are doing it by counting as "consolidated" those districts that submitted so-called "alternative plans."

This option, which does not require consolidation with another district, was made available to those school units deemed large enough that they didn't need to consolidate.

This is why vast rural school districts covering hundreds of square miles are required to consolidate, but Lewiston and Auburn are not, and neither are some 30 other school districts.

Those districts need only submit a plan outlining how they intend to deal with anticipated cuts in state school funding without "an adverse impact on the instructional program."

According to the state, 33 such plans for this kind of alternative-plan districts have been approved, and because the alternative-plan districts are the state's largest, counting them as "consolidated" gets you to nearly half of all Maine students with relative ease.

This method of accounting, though, is dishonest for two reasons.

First, it implies that far more consolidation is going on out there than is actually the case.

It is worth stating again that alternative plan districts need not consolidate with anyone.

The alternative plan for MSAD 11 in Gardiner, Pittston, Randolph and West Gardiner, for instance, is mostly a list of proposed budget cuts. The district realizes some savings by reorganizing one or two administrative positions, but the bulk of its alternative plan consists simply of cuts to guidance, athletic and other non-instructional programs.

So, for all the talk about how the reorganization effort will transform the administration of Maine schools, the 30-or-so largest school districts, which serve almost 90,000 students, are making very few meaningful changes to how they operate.

Second, suggesting that the majority of districts already have reached the consolidation goal line minimizes the real struggles with the law that many districts continue to have.

In areas where actual consolidation of districts needs to be done, things are not going that well.

The merger of MSAD 51 (Cumberland and North Yarmouth) and Falmouth, for instance, was seen as a model for the state. Despite this, representatives from the two districts met with the education commissioner only weeks ago to see if they could back out of the plan in the face of growing local opposition.

The school committee in Freeport narrowly approved its consolidation plan after defeating it once, but the plan faces growing opposition from a vocal and organized citizen group.

The school committee in Winslow voted down that area's reorganization proposal by a unanimous vote, sending the towns in that region back to the drawing board.

Kittery's school board has struggled for more than a year to comply with the consolidation law, having been turned away by three other districts.

In Orland, the school committee's decision to keep its school choice options has thrown a wrench in consolidation plans there.

In the Camden area, planners struggle to finalize a consolidation proposal many of them already oppose.

Altogether, the Department of Education has identified 28 consolidation plans, serving tens of thousands of students, that are still in the works. Most have not even been approved by the regional planning groups, much less the member school boards, the state or the voters.

Ever since this reorganization odyssey began, the Department of Education has had a habit of putting forward rosy assessments of how consolidation is going.

It would better serve the state by acknowledging the real, substantive challenges that this effort has presented school and community leaders across Maine.

University of Maine education professor Gordon Donaldson did just that in a recently published analysis of the reorganization effort, available at http://mdischools.net/20080821_Donaldson_WhereNext.htm.

In it, he describes a series of issues that continue to plague reorganization and calls for real leadership to address them.

His paper serves as a model for the kind of realistic appraisal of the situation and the challenges ahead that we should have had from the state's education leaders last week.

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