

Ralph Chapman      326-0899      rchapman@downeast.net  
455 Varnumville Road, Brooksville ME 04617

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Re: Democracy suffers from school reorganization

Dear Editor,

At the beginning of this week, the Education Subcommittee of the Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Appropriations Committee presented its (not quite finished) report to the full Committee recommending legislation to eliminate the state's current school administrative structure (Unions, SADs, CSDs, etc) and replace it with approximately 80 school districts, each with a minimum of 2500 students. The intended purpose of this legislation is to reduce taxpayer expense in administering the pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 educational system.

In addition to the elimination (or at least reclassification to lower rank) of half of the state's present school superintendents, the legislation eliminates the present local school boards and their 1800 publicly elected school committee members throughout the state. New regional school boards will control school operations including budgets, policies, transportation routes, staffing, and assignment of students to schools within each new large district.

Because most of the costs of education are related to the teaching staff, and because the proposed legislation does not include the Governor's original intent to eliminate 600 teaching positions, the cost savings from this plan are dubious. The legislation intends that the quality of education will not be reduced by the changes in administrative structure, though again, there is cause for doubt since the known correlation of parent involvement to student achievement may be adversely affected by the distancing of what was local control to regional centers.

But what is certain is that the democratic processes of citizen involvement and control of their government suffers: first by the significant downsizing of elected officials and by reducing local control of local schools; and secondly by the non-involvement of the citizenry in the process of making these changes. No input from the public by referendum vote is being allowed; no public hearings are scheduled prior to the enactment of this legislation; and indeed, no information about what the legislation actually says is (as yet) publicly available, just days before possible enactment. All of our elected school board members will be relieved of their public service on June 30, 2008 regardless of the length of their elected terms by a vote of the legislature, possibly within a few days.

I believe that the public deserves the right to know about, discuss, debate, and decide this issue, especially since it affects one of the most important of governmental functions, and ironically the very function whose purposes include the preparation of future citizens to engage with their democracy. I have contacted my state representative and my state senator and I encourage others to do the same. Let us voice our concern for our democracy and ask that this issue be processed by the public.

