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Dear Editor,

Non-solutions for Non-problems

Earlier this week, the Maine legislature and the public got their first look at the Appropriation Committee's budget bill, including a section which proposes to drastically change Maine's public education system. The legislature hopes to pass (by a 2/3 majority) a budget in the next few weeks.

The school consolidation portion needs to be completely removed from the budget bill immediately for these reasons:

1. Harmful to Democracy - the legislation eliminates 1800 publicly elected local school board members regardless of the length of their elected term; the process has not yet allowed any public hearing on the legislation; control and ownership of a community's assets (school facilities) is transferred out of town; any form of local control of education is eliminated.
2. Unnecessary - the reasons given by the Maine Department of Education for the consolidation are false and fraudulent: administrative costs in Maine's educational system are a smaller percentage (9.2%) than the national average (11.0%, FY2004); the current decline in student enrollment is expected to last only five more years before the next upswing; the current rate of decline is only two percent per year (much less than the decline in the late 1970s).
3. Harmful to Educational Quality - Maine's current educational system ranks fifth in the nation (2006) behind only four other northeast states that spend more dollars per student than Maine. The proposed legislation mentions educational quality only once, as a goal for improvement in connection with the provision requiring the Commissioner of Education to prepare maps of suggested alignments of municipalities into new regions. The further requirements of that provision cut spending for special education, transportation, facilities, and maintenance.
4. Illusory Benefits - the supposed financial benefit to taxpayers of \$36 million is a complete fabrication. It is the same number of dollars that were to be saved by the Governor's original proposal that achieved some savings from cutting four percent of the teaching positions (\$26 million savings) and eighty percent of the superintendents (about \$10 million if no new assistants were hired). Now that the plan does not cut teaching positions and cuts fewer than half of the superintendents, the projected savings are overstated by at least \$31 million.
5. Unrealistic Expectations - the need for special education services is increasing, in part due to the explosion in the incidence of autism; transportation will require increases due to the rapidly escalating costs for fuel; facilities and maintenance will require increases due to rising heating fuel costs; and yet these are the very areas for which the proposed legislation mandates less spending.

My loss of trust for our Department of Education follows from: a) the recent experience of the Essential Programs and Services funding model which has worsened rather than bettered equity in Maine schools in spite of stated goals to the contrary, b) the illogic displayed in portraying administrative costs as the reason for Maine's high per-student educational expense, c) the fraud displayed by claiming a precipitous drop in enrollment forcing the need for immediate change, and d) the fraud displayed by claiming that Maine's school administrative costs are high.

I sincerely hope that the energies of the multitude of dedicated public servants working to provide Maine kids with the best education per dollar in the country will not be lessened by having to deal with the abuse of power displayed by our leaders in the Governor's Office, the Maine Department of Education Commissioner's Office, and a handful of legislators whose actions suggest they have yet to look at the facts.

Let us express our pride in Maine's public educational system and Maine's democratic processes by encouraging our legislators to remove the ill-planned school consolidation section from the proposed budget.

-- Ralph Chapman
Brooksville