

## Myth based policy making

Governor Baldacci signed into law last week the state budget legislation overwhelmingly passed by both the House and the Senate the day before. The budget included a change to Maine's public educational system more drastic than any in well over a half century. The "school consolidation" piece of the state budget, formed by a sub-committee of the Appropriations Committee was not presented to the public until two days before it was enacted into law. No public hearings were held. Many people are not yet aware of the content of the new law.

Eighteen hundred elected school board members have had their jobs eliminated including all of those for whom readers here have voted. Local control, if any, will be at the discretion of newly formed Regional School Unit administrations. Ownership of local school facilities are removed from the municipalities in which they reside. The future will decide whether these changes are a benefit to our educational system or not.

What concerns me the most is that the decision making process was based on myth rather than fact. Because the public had no opportunity to be heard, and because our political leadership chose to present false and fraudulent information, the decision (good or bad) was produced under circumstances that do not reflect well upon our democratic principles.

Foremost among the myths is that there was a problem with our educational system. In fact, our schools have proved to be unusually good: rated fifth in the nation last year; the four states that rated better all spent more money on education per student than Maine.

In particular, the Maine Department of Education has presented the myth that education administrative costs are particularly burdensome in Maine. In fact, the fraction of educational costs going toward administration in Maine is 16% BELOW the national average. Even on a per-student basis, Maine's educational administrative costs are LESS than the national average.

The myth that our declining student population has forced these drastic structural changes to our education system ignores the fact that the student population is projected to start increasing again in only five years. We have managed to accommodate the last ten years of decline as we have managed to accommodate the previous ten years of increase. Our present decline is part of continuing ups and downs that, at most, are a few percent per year.

The reason that the school consolidation piece was included in the budget was so that a mythical thirty six and a half million dollar savings could be credited to the state's budget. In fact, the thirty six and a half million dollars is the same savings calculated for the Governor's original proposal that eliminated four percent of the state's teaching positions (\$26 million) and eighty percent of the state's superintendents (\$10 million if there were no additional positions created). Since the budget passed last week cut no teaching positions and fewer than half of the superintendents, the projected savings are overstated by at least thirty one million dollars.

The public's vigilance faltered here and our democracy has suffered an assault. I encourage every school board member to write a letter to the local state Representative and Senator expressing his or her feelings toward being relieved of his or her voluntary public service elected position.

—Ralph Chapman, Brooksville