

Option of Regional Unions will allow more extensive school reorganization

Many school Reorganization Planning Committees are finding that local expenses in reorganized districts will be higher than the local cost of not reorganizing -- even after adding in penalties for non-compliance. These higher costs may result from the additional costs of uniform regional pay scales and cost-shifts between municipalities that are beyond remedy by regional cost-sharing.

Voters in these towns will vote down reorganization plans.

As a result, fewer reorganized districts will be formed and Maine will end up with more than 80 regional school administrations. State and local taxpayers will miss opportunities for more efficient schools and cost savings. Voters will be angry at the State about the resulting penalties.

Regional Unions provide an alternative vehicle for some districts to achieve regional efficiencies without incurring prohibitive additional local expenses.

According to education policy analyst David Silvernail, the costs of governance and administration of existing school unions are not statistically distinguishable from those in SADs administering schools in towns of similar size and valuation.

Through Regional Unions, the Damon amendment to LD 1932 will allow districts to establish more coherent regional administration, more coordinated curricula, more common bargaining units, and more overall collaborative cooperation than will otherwise be possible -- exactly the kind of administrative consolidation that was the original purpose of this whole effort of school reorganization.

In Regional Unions, citizens retain their close local connection and budgetary oversight of their schools while still realizing the educational benefits which result from coordinated regional cooperation. The State saves no less money than it would otherwise from reorganization and the schools are improved.

Local taxpayers and the State both will benefit from the greater scope and success of school reorganization made possible through the Damon amendment.

Don't Regional Unions cost more than other school governance models?

The Department of Education [recently has suggested](#) that Union governance, on average, costs at least \$1000 more annually per pupil than other forms of school governance.

That statistic is categorically misapplied.

Regional Unions provide a vehicle for municipal school units [to reduce](#) administrative expenses by sharing them with other municipalities. So, by definition, Unions are administratively at least as efficient as municipal school districts and almost certainly substantially *more efficient* than their member municipalities would be if they operated independently.

Like standard Reorganized School Units, Regional Unions are governed by the same elected citizens who serve on local boards. Only the same trivial expenses of governance are incurred under either model.

In similarly-sized systems serving similarly-valued municipalities, [administration costs are indistinguishable](#) between Unions and other governance structures. Compare system administration costs in Bar Harbor's Union 98 school with those of consolidated districts in towns of similar size with similar coastal valuations.

Bar Harbor, Union 98: 4.14%, (\$474 per student)
SAD 28, Camden: 4.12%, (\$454)
SAD 50, Thomaston: 4.89% (\$593)
SAD 56 in Searsport: 4.33%, (\$519)

David Silvernail, in a January 8, 2008 presentation to the Legislature's Education Committee, reported that [no clean conclusion can be drawn](#) about the relationship between overall per-pupil cost and governance structure. From below-average to above-average, the full range of costs is represented in every type of school administrative system. According to Silvernail, the single greatest predictor of per-pupil cost is community valuation.

So, what is shown by the Department's numbers is evidence that Union structures may more comfortably (and perhaps even more efficiently) serve regions with fewer people and therefore smaller class sizes and also regions of higher valuation and less state subsidy where more local money is spent in the classroom on expanded educational programs.

To see where the extra \$1000 per pupil is spent in Union schools, compare the State average for "[regular instruction](#)" with this cost center in the following high performing Union schools:

Maine average: \$4,119
Bar Harbor: \$5,238
Boothbay: \$5,774
Mount Desert: \$6,383
Palermo: \$5,134
Veazie: \$6,457

This is where the money goes in many Union schools: to the essential core of school business and the very area of education that reorganization is intended to bolster, not to inefficient regional administration.

The Damon Amendment will help such districts achieve further administrative savings without incurring the costs associated with the current law.

Doesn't local control deprive students of educational opportunity?

Evidently not.

Identical percentages of schools within consolidated School Administrative Districts (42 of 313) and municipalities (46 of 359) are classified as higher performing.

However, 21% (66 of 313) of the schools in SADs are classified as lower performing, while only 11% (40 of 359) of municipal schools are.

Students do better in schools that are closely connected to their communities through local oversight. Schools without that local connection are more likely to underperform.

How are budgets raised and validated in Regional Unions?

Budgets will be assembled just as they are currently in unions. Each municipality will budget, approve, validate, and assess its own share of local expense along with its portion of the regional budget. Expenses for regional core functions, as set out by the reorganization plan approved at local referendum, will be set by the combined local boards and these regional expenses will become part of each local budget and subject to the same requirements of local validation.

No one scrutinizes school budgets more closely than a municipal warrant committee and local voters at town meeting.

Don't Union superintendents spend too much of their time in too many local meetings?

There is no doubt that Union superintendents frequently are intimately connected with their schools. Many find this vertical integration to be an efficient way to stay closely informed on essential administrative issues. Similarly, many Union schools directly benefit from this contact from superintendents who carry a unifying educational vision.

Local issues often are more efficiently resolved at local meetings than they would be at prolonged regional meetings. So the total time spent directly in local meetings rather than in meetings with intermediary subcommittees may not be greater than in consolidated districts.

(Note also, that in Regional Unions formed under the Damon amendment, the superintendent is not required to attend meetings of the local education units, but may delegate that job to others with administrative credentials, such as a building principal.)

Schools that are closely supported through governance and administrators can achieve greater educational goals more efficiently.

Will Regional Unions divert state funds for education from areas like Portland that don't have Unions?

No. State General Purpose Aid to education is distributed according to the State's formula for Essential Programs and Services which is regionally altered to account for local labor markets and relative local property valuation. Subsidies are not affected by the structure of school governance. The Damon amendment carries no fiscal impact; it shifts no money in state aid.

School expenses above state-determined and state-limited levels of GPA are borne only by local taxpayers.

References:

Maine Department of Education, [Handout to legislators](#), February 14, 2008

Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr., [School Unions in Maine: A Viable Alternative](#), April 2, 2007

Department of Education, [2006-07 Financial Indicators for School Administrative Units -- percentages](#)

Brian Hubbell, [Notes from Education Committee work session](#), January 8, 2008.

Department of Education, [2006-07 Financial Indicators for School Administrative Units – per-pupil expenditure amounts](#)

David L. Silvernail; [The Identification of Higher and Lower Performing Maine Schools](#), School Profiles and Characteristics; Maine Education Policy Research Institute; May 2007

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