

## **Repeal School Consolidation NOW**

**by Derek Viger of the Augustinsider.us Blog 10/7/2009**

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Numbers don't say much by themselves. People can take a set of numbers and tell a story. Those who want to keep the current school consolidation law want to tell you a story. They want to tell you consolidation is working. 85% of Maine students are in districts already in compliance with consolidation law. A repeal of consolidation law will cost taxpayers \$37 million every year, supporters say. Consolidation supporters want to construct a story around those numbers to scare you into believing a repeal will cause more programs to be slashed. When you look at the truth behind their numbers we find their story is flawed.

School consolidation has not worked and must be repealed.

The 85% in compliance number is not something consolidation proponents plucked from thin air. That is true, but when you break that down it doesn't look so nice. As of June 2009, there were 217 school districts in Maine. Of the 85% in compliance the overwhelming majority of districts, 57%, were given exemptions. Most were exempted because of their size or because they were island or tribal districts. 11 districts were given exemptions after failed reorganization attempts and 3 others argued for exemption as "high performing districts". Should these be counted as success stories? Certainly not. They FAILED to reorganize. Towns with clout like Cape Elizabeth, Falmouth, and Yarmouth were able to maneuver out of having to reorganize. Only 26 new districts were actually formed. How can we ask the supposed non-compliant districts to reorganize or face penalties when the state has already shown they are willing to just give out passes to the big players. Does that sound like a good policy to you?

The \$37 million cost to taxpayers was a figure the Maine Legislature was informed school consolidation would save state and local communities. That cost would rise because the 123rd Legislature already cut that amount from General Purpose Aid based on those predicted savings. This was no savings at all. Nothing in the law assures any savings. There was just a cut in state spending based on a prediction. Who will pick up the slack? Local communities. No one says a repeal will increase property taxes. Taxes will be increased BECAUSE of current school consolidation laws. Some communities that have consolidated are seeing property tax increases already: Pownal 25%, Durham 19%, Alna 33%. The loss of GPA funding is really putting a crunch on the towns that can least afford it. Current school consolidation efforts are a cost shift, not a cost reduction.

It must also be noted, Governor Baldacci pushed school consolidation from being an education policy issue to a fiscal issue with the suggestion that \$37 million could be saved. By using the false savings carrot on an poorly conceived bill Baldacci embedded school consolidation policy in the budget where policy issues were necessarily secondary to the huge hole that would have remained if the policy turned out to be wrong. This was done without any testing by reorganizing a few districts to see if these savings claims would hold up. Despite all of this, Education Commissioner Susan Gendron said the \$37 million would not disappear if consolidation was repealed. To keep the budget balanced the DoE is prepared to add a supplement to the budget, which would then need to be approved by the legislature.

This is why so many communities said no. They were given a bill that supposedly saved them money. Communities realized there were no real savings, but a cost increase. A bill meant to save money on education that in effect costs more money is a failure.

A few have hoped that we can continue patching this bill and make consolidation work. I am a proponent of consolidation – just not this bill. Consolidation, if done right, can save Maine school districts money. This plan however is a hydra. The we try to deal with it the worse it will get. The law is too restrictive to begin with. The current school consolidation is bristling with penalties for non-compliance. Again how can some wealthy communities be given an exemption while less fortunate towns get slapped with fines? What can you do if your reorganized union is not working out? SADs had a method for backing out. The new RSUs don't. If you want to for an RSU smaller than the minimum you can't. Commissioner Gendron said she was approached with some of these requests, but under the current law had to reject them.

This is just what we started with. You can look at all of the legislation proposed on consolidation this year here. "Give them more time" proponents of current consolidation law will tell you, "they'll get it right." How much more time should we give them? I say no more.

Consolidation has worked out well for some districts. The union of MSAD 21, 39, 43, and Hanover in the Dixfield Rumford area has gone well. House Majority Whip Representative Seth Berry (D-Bowdoinham) reports that RSU 2 in his district is also one of the exceptions. Rep. Berry has, however, categorized the consolidation bill as poorly executed. "What I have found," Rep. Berry said, "is that positive reforms are best accomplished by providing incentives, clear targets, and a plan for short-term costs. I don't believe we provided any of these adequately when the law was first passed." Rep. Berry said that he preferred to

allocate less money for administration and let local districts work out their own cuts. Read Rep. Berry's full statement here.

Rep. Berry has also said he is committed to allowing successful RSUs to stand should consolidation be repealed. I agree, who wouldn't. This will make the transition back a smooth one. As stated earlier, most districts were exempt so they won't be affected by a repeal. If you like your RSU and decide to stay you won't be affected. Commissioner Gendron said that some legislation would be proposed if consolidation is repealed that would transform them into SADs. This would allow districts to withdraw from a union that wasn't working.

Even if you live in an area exempt from consolidation you should support the repeal. Even if you are happy in your new RSU you should support the repeal. Consolidation is hurting the communities who can least afford it. The cost of education is not being reduced: it is being shifted from state to local communities. The current \$37 million savings will not disappear if consolidation is repealed. Successful RSUs will not be disbanded if consolidation is repealed. The sky will not fall. We must stand up and say this plan has not worked. It is ham-fisted, forceful and restrictive. There are better alternatives that can't be reached from where we stand now.

Let's start over and create a sensible plan that will work for everyone. Please vote Yes on question 3 and repeal school consolidation.

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