

Maine Coalition to Save Schools

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Senator Alford, Representative Sutherland, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Skip Greenlaw, and I am Chair of Maine Coalition to Save Schools.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today to discuss our experiences with the school district consolidation law. Since there is a limited amount of time, we shall only comment on specific recommendations for changes to the law.

We have prepared other materials for your consideration, including case studies to back up these recommendations, which we shall leave with you. We shall be pleased to meet with you again if you wish to discuss in more detail any of these recommendations for amendments to the law.

We recommend:

1. Eliminate the size restrictions for consolidation.

This would allow more creative cost-saving collaborations between school units -- both large exempt districts and small noncompliant ones.

2. Amend the law which encourages cooperation among school administrative units by allowing for collaboratives to qualify as a legitimate "alternative structure" relative to the consolidation law.

This would provide for other avenues of efficiencies besides consolidation of central office administration.

3. Remove the inequitable penalties for noncompliance and let districts create their own solutions based on the financial merits and the realities of diminished subsidies.

Given the broader pain of drastic reductions in state subsidy and the fact that these districts did comply with the law by formulating and voting on consolidation plans, these vestigial penalties will not create the sought after efficiencies. Consolidation should stand or fall on its own financial merit and the impact on the quality of education.

4. Provide for the option to withdraw from RSUs and AOSs at any time in order to pursue more productive district administrative arrangements.

Marriages are healthier and more productive when they continue by mutual agreement rather than life time jail sentences.

5. Provide separate state subsidy calculations for member districts by enacting the language contained in LD#160, held over from last session.

This would provide the necessary information which units need to allocate subsidy accurately and would likely encourage additional new consolidated districts.

6. Allow districts a local option to trim administrative expenses by eliminating the law's general requirement for both a budget meeting and a budget validation referendum.

The budget validation referendum has created unnecessary expenses for cities and towns and has not attracted meaningful voter participation.

7. Examine the "one collective bargaining unit" requirement for RSUs and AOSs to determine if alternative collective bargaining procedures can be enacted.

We understand that \$137 million or more will be reduced from "General Purpose Aid to Education" from FY 08-09 to FY 10-11. It is an unrealistic expectation to ask the newly formed RSUs to level up salaries and benefits in these economic times and in the face of such drastic subsidy reductions. This one issue is the primary reason why more districts did not consolidate, and this one issue will cause the most problems as implementation of consolidation moves forward.

REQUEST:

We respectfully request that whatever changes this Committee recommends to the full legislature that the changes be embodied in one bill, that the bill be given a public hearing, and that the legislation be enacted by January 29, 2010.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. We shall be pleased to respond to any questions and would like to continue to work with you on these critical issues.