

October 21, 2009

Why You Should Vote Yes on 3 to Repeal Consolidation

The law has not worked.

- Despite a goal of reducing Maine's 290 districts to 80 by July 1 of this year, 218 remain.
- In more than 100 communities, voters simply rejected consolidation despite being threatened with penalties in the form of reduced state aid.
- Another 42 districts were given a pass by the Department of Education even though more than half were under the so-called optimum size of 2,500.
- The Legislature let another 12 districts off the hook, declaring them inland islands, in addition to eight real islands and the three Maine Indian Education schools that were exempt as part of the original legislation.
- There are unintended consequences and costs in the 26 new districts that were formed under the law and local taxes are going up.

The law is not fair.

- It disproportionately affects rural Maine, while urban areas were not required to merge with anyone.
- There are 65 districts, representing 55 percent of the state's enrollment, that were not forced to consolidate because of size, location or other special dispensations granted by the Department of Education.
- Another 126 got no exemption and face \$5 million in penalties next year for exercising their rights at the ballot box to reject the consolidation mandate.

The law has not saved any money; it has cost money.

- Mandatory consolidation already has cost the state an estimated \$4 million to enforce, but the Department of Education says it's too soon to quantify any real savings at the local level.
- The law requires that teacher contracts in merging districts be merged as well, with level salaries. The impact of this leveling up is hundreds of thousands in additional salary costs per district.
- There has been a cost shift onto communities that have merged. In RSU 5, residents in Pownal are seeing their taxes increase by 25 percent and in Durham by 19 percent, while Freeport's taxes are going down. In RSU 12, Alna residents are seeing their tax bills go up by 33 percent.

The law is too rigid.

- There is no legal way communities can get out of a merged district once they are in one, even if the arrangement is not working for the citizens and students of that community.
- The law does not recognize other forms of cooperation among school districts as a legal alternative to mandated consolidation -- cooperatives that could actually save money, regardless of a district's size.

The solution.

- Voters need to repeal school consolidation on Nov. 3, and let districts explore true cost-saving measures while maintaining local control over their schools.
- The 26 new districts that have merged can stay merged if they want, with a simple law change that allows them to become a School Administrative District or a Union.
- That move also allows those communities that want to get out of a new merged district to do so because existing SAD and Union laws have escape mechanisms triggered by local votes.
- Voluntary cooperation needs to go forward to help all districts save money, regardless of their size.