

Maine Education Association's Q & A on School Regionalization

Q. What is school regionalization all about?

A. Governmental leaders are trying to apply economies of scale to Maine schools. They hope to save money by consolidating school services and/or schools in regional matrices. A number of studies, including the 2006 report by the Brookings Institute, indicate that Maine's current school administrative-governance system is expensive and inefficient.

Q. What is driving regionalization?

A. Voter unrest over taxes as demonstrated in the recent referenda over TABOR and the Palesky tax cap.

Q. What are MEA's interests in regionalization?

A. MEA hopes to defuse the anti-tax fever while preserving the programs and services students need from pre-kindergarten through graduate school.

Q. What are the options?

A. At least seven major plans on regional services have been developed and five bills presented to the legislature. The sidebar identifies the players and plans.

Q. What will happen?

A. All the bills have been presented for review by the Education Committee whose members will report out a measure for consideration by the legislature. It is extremely likely that some compromise bill will pass that provides for regional services and/or a reorganization of schools.

Q. As the various regionalization proposals and compromises unfold, what criteria will MEA use to evaluate them?

A. MEA will seek to preserve the quality of our schools while supporting reasonable ideas that offer savings through economies of scale, particularly in administration. We are mindful of Maine's long tradition of local control and the value of small schools. We will advocate for the preservation of educator rights and contracts.

Q. What is MEA's position?

A. MEA supports the Coalition bill, "An Act to Ensure Responsible Government Spending, Investment and Public School Efficiency." The Association started working with the Maine State Chamber of Commerce and Maine Municipal Association last October to draft a plan that balances the interest in tax relief against the ongoing need for high-quality schools and public services. We are convinced that is what voters have supported in the last four referenda battles (Question 1, Question 1A, Palesky, TABOR), not an extreme or drastic cost-cutting measure.

Q. What does the Coalition bill do?

A. It proposes a regional delivery of school administrative services with a goal of reducing costs by 10%. Regional Planning Alliances of local officials and community members would develop and implement their plans by July 2009. And, the coalition plan keeps the promise to Maine citizens and to school employees to fully fund 55% of the cost of public schools without manipulating the school funding formula.

Q. Does the plan address administrative costs?

A. Yes. It seeks a reduction in the cost of school administrative services without adversely impacting the quality of education available to all Maine students.

Q. How will it operate?

A. The Coalition Plan respects Maine's tradition of citizen involvement in local government decision-making by including members of the public, municipalities, and school districts in 26 planning alliances charged with identifying savings in specific administrative areas.

Q. What can MEA members do?

A. Work with your administration, school board members, and parents to rally support for the Coalition Plan. Call and write your legislators urging them to support a reasonable regionalization plan and not go to extremes.

Q. What about MEA contracts and collective bargaining rights?

A. The Coalition Plan protects the collective bargaining rights of school employees and the collective bargaining agreements of MEA members. The legislation would carry the status quo of the contracts forward into the new arrangements – if/when new employers are created MEA would bargain new contracts for the new employee bargaining units.

Q. If school systems are consolidated as proposed in some of the plans, how would differences in salaries and benefits be reconciled?

A. Through collective bargaining.

Q. How will all this impact current negotiations?

A. It should not. MEA advises locals to continue bargaining as in the past. Any legislation that is adopted should provide for the continuance of contractual rights and benefits until a successor agreement is negotiated, if and where that is needed.

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Players and Plans

The **Coalition** (MEA, Maine Municipal Association, Maine State Chamber of Commerce and others) **Plan** creates 26 regional planning districts with a goal of saving 10% by 2010, preserving local school board authority and local educator contracts.

Gov. Baldacci's plan creates 26 super-sized school districts (1800-20,000 students) and shifts governance authority to the new regional authority. Estimated savings: \$241 million. The Governor wants immediate implementation with savings booked into the 2008 budget. He would increase class sizes, reduce administrators and central office staff, and eliminate 649 teaching positions.

The **Maine Children's Alliance plan** establishes 26 Planning Alliances that could lead to consolidation, with new high school construction being offered as an incentive. They would leave local control intact, set a standardized school calendar, and look for savings through cuts in administration and increased cooperation.

The **Maine State Board of Education** would create 65 school districts serving 3,000 to 4,000 students. Estimated savings: \$82 million over five years. School boards would have limited authority as control moved to the new regional districts. A Blue Ribbon Committee would redraw district lines which would then be mandated by the Legislature.

The **ESD Plan** was drafted by former legislator and Maine Heritage Policy Center analyst Stephen Bowen. It creates Education Services Districts (ESD), cooperative agreements among school districts to share services. He recommends they be authorized by the legislature; be given no revenue powers; and, be denied staff unless equivalent or greater services or staff numbers are cut by local districts.

Other plans include one by Sen. Karl Turner creating 75 school districts, each serving some 2,200 students, to be developed by an 11-member committee with an implementation goal of July 2008. Turner would transfer governance authority to the new regional districts.

For more on MEA's views on
regionalization:

http://maine.nea.org/dir3/local_schools.htm

For a comprehensive directory
maintained by MDISchools.net:

[http://sparkflashgap.net/School/
SchoolConsolidationReferences.html](http://sparkflashgap.net/School/SchoolConsolidationReferences.html)