

School consolidation law is failed experiment

The proof that the state's mandatory school consolidation law has been a failure is in the numbers.

- 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 and several are just at or below the 1,200 enrollment minimum outlined in the law.
- 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.
- Of the 26 new districts that were formed through consolidation, 13 are under 2,000 students and one was declared a Regional School Unit even though it merged with no one.

Perhaps the most troublesome number of all is the voter turnout in the elections that decided the fate of those districts.

In the votes held after the November election, when the presidential race drew crowds out to the polls, turnout was as low as 4 and 5 percent. That's 300 people deciding the fate for 6,000.

And now the Department of Education is saying the majority of the state has consolidated even though more than half of the students in Maine – 105,320 out of 190,546 – go to schools in districts that were exempt from doing anything. To bolster its numbers, the department is in the process of identifying even those School Administrative Districts that did not consolidate – either by voter choice or state exemption -- as Regional School Units.

In short, the administration in Augusta is playing games to hide the real numbers and shore up a failed policy that should be repealed. School consolidation has not saved the pie-in-the-sky numbers promised by its proponents. The reality is savings generated by consolidating central offices could more than be eaten up by the cost of equalizing teacher contracts.

The countless hours and millions of dollars that have been consumed by this mandate have taken time and money from the most important job for schools – improving the quality of education. It is time we got rid of a bad law that by any measure has failed and focus on encouraging the kind of voluntary regional cooperation that adds up to real savings and better schools.