

Voluntary cooperatives work better than mandates

The school consolidation law, which is up for repeal on the November ballot, is a rigid mandate that lacks the flexibility needed to allow districts to find real cost savings regardless of their size or location.

The law was hastily put together and hasn't worked the way even its most ardent supporters had hoped. While the Legislature's goal was to reduce the 290 districts in the state to 80, 218 remain because voters in more than 100 communities exercised their democratic right to say there must be a better way – a way that preserves local control while recognizing that costs have to be cut.

There is another law on the books that allows for that flexibility. It was passed earlier this year to provide voluntary options for school districts, including the 65 that were not forced to consolidate because of size, location or other special dispensations granted by the Department of Education.

The trouble is the Legislature did not recognize voluntary cooperation as a legal alternative to mandated consolidation – a major obstacle that can be removed if mandated consolidation is repealed.

That law is "An Act to Encourage Cooperation among School Administrative Units." It outlines 14 areas where school districts can pool their resources to more efficiently provide services, from special education to pre-school programs, and back-office functions like purchasing, accounting and designing bus routes.

The beauty of the cooperative act is it takes away arbitrary size limits to allow all school districts to work together. But that can only be effective if these voluntary cooperatives are allowed to exist without forcing districts to continue jumping through the hoops of mandated consolidation.

A case in point is East Machias. Five years ago the town withdrew from a School Administrative District to save money. They contracted for the services of a superintendent and central office and benefitted from real savings because their taxpayers were no longer required to subsidize other towns' students, as they were in the SAD. They saved by collaborating with another local school in sharing costs and were able to share services and purchasing with the town of East Machias, creating major savings for both the school and municipality.

When the school district consolidation law was enacted in 2007, it forced East Machias to again look at an arrangement that would end up costing taxpayers more money.

The town tried to opt out of the law, pay the penalty, and stick to the business of educating students at their school which, incidentally, recently had the highest score in eighth-grade assessments in the state. However, the law required them to invest in the significant effort and expense of creating a plan and submitting it to their voters, who rejected consolidation 99-3.

East Machias has now returned its focus to education – with an added benefit: No plans were approved by voters in Washington County, so other neighboring schools were available to join the group contracting for superintendent services. They were careful to evaluate how many schools could be added without needing to increase personnel, and the result is reduced costs for each participant. They continue to explore other means of collaborating on real cost-saving measures.

That spirit of finding a better way is a Maine tradition. What school districts need is the flexibility to work together in areas that make sense for the communities and the children they service.

The best way to get that process moving is to repeal the school consolidation law on Nov. 3 and start encouraging ideas that will really save the tax payers money.

Maine Coalition to Save Schools