

# Avoiding consolidation's pitfalls

Submitted by Matthew Stone on Thu, 07/02/2009

No matter how silently it passed, Wednesday marked a milestone in Maine's school district consolidation saga.

That's the day when 97 school districts officially merged into 25 larger, regional units. The number of Maine school districts has dropped to 218, down from the 290 Gov. John Baldacci pledged to merge into 26 when he first unveiled his plans for school district consolidation in January 2007.

When the clock struck midnight on July 1, one consolidated, regional district had already been operating for a year: Regional School Unit 1, based in Bath.

Douglas Rooks, education project director at the Maine Children's Alliance, released [a report \(PDF\)](#) Monday taking a look at what the coastal district has accomplished in its year in existence.

You can tell a bit about the report's conclusions by simply reading its title: "Education First: How the Bath Area Made Reorganization Work."

According to Rooks' report, RSU 1 has managed to avoid many of the pitfalls that plagued consolidation proposals that failed at the ballot box throughout the 2008-09 academic year.

## **1. The district is avoiding dominance by a single municipality.**

RSU 1, which serves Arrowsic, Bath, Phippsburg, West Bath and Woolwich, could easily have become Bath-dominated, marginalizing the smaller member towns. But the regional school unit is employing a unique school board structure in which members represent districts that cross town lines. That way, ideas don't live or die depending on the town in which they originate.

Two RSU 1 board members hail from 500-resident Arrowsic, Rooks notes. The 9,000-resident Bath has the same number of representatives.

"The important thing is that we're able to balance interests and come to a consensus that feels right," RSU 1 board chairman Charles Durfee tells Rooks.

## **2. District planners kept their focus on education.**

Rather than make the regionalization process one focused exclusively on how to pay for schools, the Bath-area district made education a key element of regionalization discussions. Consolidation was seen as an opportunity to improve curriculum, taking the best practices from different schools and applying them district-wide.

Rooks notes district officials have made expanding the number of Advanced Placement classes a priority, and they've shifted finances around to introduce foreign languages at all of the district's elementary schools. High school seniors take part in senior projects now, as a way to stanch "senioritis," the laziness that takes hold after seniors complete college applications. And RSU 1 is expanding pre-school offerings at "minimal additional costs to the district," according to Rooks.

### **3. The superintendent didn't assume the most expensive scenario.**

A number of school district consolidation plans went down at the polls in part because residents feared the costs of evening out disparate teacher contracts. The assumption was that new, district-wide contracts would default to the highest-paying salaries and most generous benefits already in place in certain parts of the new districts. For example, Dedham residents didn't want to assume the costs of raising their teachers' salaries to Brewer levels.

RSU 1 Superintendent William Shuttleworth refused to conform to that scenario. Rooks writes of Shuttleworth's philosophy: "[T]he results of new contracts need to be affordable for taxpayers, and that responsibility exists in a newly consolidated district just as it does in existing ones."

Shuttleworth didn't make any promises about the results of post-consolidation contract negotiations before the merger vote took place.

"It would be irresponsible for us to set contract terms in advance of negotiations," Shuttleworth told Rooks. "This is part of what superintendents have to do, and we can't avoid that responsibility."