

# KENNEBEC JOURNAL

## School officials back legislation on cooperatives

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Staff Writer 03/31/2009

AUGUSTA -- Maine school superintendents urged members of a legislative committee Monday to adopt legislation that would encourage more school districts to form money-saving cooperatives.

In recent years, a number of districts have joined forces to buy supplies in bulk and share the costs of special education, transportation and teacher training.

Those districts have reaped the benefits in savings and expanded education opportunities, school officials told members of the Education Committee.

"I think this piece of legislation is critically necessary," said James Morse, superintendent of Oakland-based School Administrative District 47 and who will soon take over as Portland schools superintendent.

Morse helped start the Kennebec Valley Alliance -- a cooperative that focused at first on bulk purchases of school supplies -- with other Waterville-area superintendents.

Today, the cooperative includes five school districts in Kennebec and Somerset counties that collaborate on adult education, special education, summer school, transportation and other services.

"As time went on, superintendents said, 'Why are we limited to purchasing paper and school supplies together?'" Morse said.

The legislation, LD 1049, would allow school districts interested in collaborating to apply to the Maine Department of Education to form regional education cooperatives. A cooperative board -- with representation from each of the involved districts -- would oversee each partnership.

"It formalizes what's been going on informally for a long time," said Rep. Patricia Sutherland, D-Chapman, the bill's sponsor.

The bill would let school districts design their own partnerships.

"This legislation is not to tell people what to do and how to do it, but to give them support," said Elinor Goldberg, president of the Maine Children's Alliance, a group supporting the bill.

The 11 school districts that belong to the Western Maine Education Collaborative share teachers of classes that typically attract few students, said Thomas Ward, superintendent of Dixfield-based SAD 21 and president of that cooperative.

The districts have saved money while offering academic programs they would not have been able to afford on their own, he said.

"We feel we have a strong model for the state," Ward said.

In the Machias area, 11 towns are forming a cooperative to save costs, said Scott Porter, superintendent of School Union 102. Those towns opposed state-mandated district consolidation plans and are facing penalties as a result.

"Since efficiencies can be achieved by sharing services without changing governance, regional education cooperatives should be embraced as another consolidation alternative," Porter said. "School districts that participate in cooperatives should not be subject to financial penalties."

The cooperatives bill is not written as a consolidation alternative. But Porter called it "the right first step."

The legislation attracted no formal opposition during Monday's hearing. But Mark Gray, executive director of the Maine Education Association, questioned whether legislation was needed to encourage districts to pursue regional cooperatives.

The Education Committee has yet to schedule a vote on the bill.