

Testimony of Dr. James C. Morse, Sr.
Superintendent of Schools, MSAD 47
Before the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
On Monday, March 30, 2009

Regarding L.D. 1049, “An Act to Encourage Cooperation Among School Administrative Units”

Senator Alford, Representative Sutherland and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Dr. James C. Morse, Sr., I am the Superintendent of Schools in MSAD 47 representing the communities of Belgrade, Oakland, Rome and Sidney located in Kennebec County.

I am here today in support of L.D. 1049, “An Act to Encourage Cooperation among School Administrative Units.”

Before legislated consolidation, school districts across Maine engaged in collaboration, cooperation and alliances of choice. Such collaboratives existed throughout the state. Examples include ECO in Northern Maine, the Kennebec Valley Alliance in Central Maine, the Western Maine Partnership in Western Maine, and the Casco Bay Alliance in Southern Maine. The history of these efforts is pretty simple; a group of like-minded superintendents got together, decided they would work together, developed bi-laws and

formed alliances to 'get a bigger bang for their buck'. They used their combined purchasing power to buy in bulk at significantly reduced prices. Much of this work went unrecognized at the time because most of it occurred under the radar. In the early years, paper products, copying services, cleaning materials, and school supplies represented the initial efforts. Superintendents saved taxpayers thousands of dollars in the process. As time went on, some of the superintendents realized that they could combine their efforts in other areas and started expanding into common professional development, curriculum development, shared staff and actually began combining programs and services.

Districts started thinking regionally. Bus drivers, custodians, and food service workers were brought together from surrounding school systems in order to maximize limited staff development dollars. Training in nutrition, environmentally friendly cleaning, and driver safety were all topics covered regionally. By doing such training together, each district maximized its limited budgets.

As time went on, districts started down the path of shared administrative functions. In some regions Adult Education Programs were combined including having one Director for multiple school systems, Food Service Administration and common nutritional monthly food calendars were implemented, and the beginnings of regional transportation programs started taking shape.

There were two major problems with these early regional cooperatives: first, they were 'hit or miss'. Most were built upon the initiative, trust and friendship of individual superintendents. Thus, large holes existed throughout Maine where such efforts either didn't develop because of inter school system rivalries or because the politics in a given area prevented much movement in the direction of regionalized services. Second, legislated consolidation overwhelmed these early efforts to cooperate, as all energy and effort was expended attempting to meet the requirements of the consolidation law.

The consolidation timetable has now expired; those who would consolidate now have. Now what? Are we going to enter an era of penalties where Maine's largely poorest school systems lose limited precious state education dollars because there was no political will to consolidate? Will Maine's poorest children suffer because the adults in their communities refused to consolidate? Is there an alternative? I believe there is.

I believe there is by taking a page from the school districts that were working on regionalizing voluntarily before mandated consolidation. Why can't individual school units, Alternative Organization Structured school systems, and Regional School Units still work together voluntarily and form Cooperative Administrative Units. I believe it is imperative that they do so. In an era of shrinking state financial support, school systems need to find ways to stretch limited funds.

No superintendent that I have talked to is against the idea of voluntary cooperatives because such cooperatives are based upon choice, the choice of the school systems and their taxpayers. Cooperatives respect Maine's heritage of 'rugged individualism' that we characterize as 'local control'. Cooperatives allow school systems to choose who they would partner with, what they feel should be regionalized, and what makes sense in their areas to regionalize. Cooperatives allow for relationship building between systems and minimize political conflict even as budgets are maximized. In order to move forward, we must learn from our past voluntary efforts in creating cooperatives and alliances, in order to build an effective and lasting foundation toward our collective future.

I believe that LD 1049 provides the pathway to real savings for the Maine taxpayer without political 'pushback'. I believe that there are incredible efficiencies yet to be had in Maine School Systems that have not yet been realized. LD 1049 outlines a number of examples that could be pursued from alternative education to transportation, but does not limit the creativity and the ingenuity of those school systems that choose to participate. School systems across Maine will embrace the idea of working together voluntarily. This law provides the vehicle for them to do so. This law provides a quality pathway toward maximizing limited funds with maximum community support. This law is a win-win for all, school systems, their communities, the taxpayer, and most importantly, the children.

I want to personally thank Representative Sutherland for her sponsorship of this bill and

hope that the Committee will support it as well.