

**Testimony on LD 1049,
An Act to Encourage Cooperation Among School Administrative Units**

Elinor Goldberg, President and CEO, Maine Children's Alliance

Sen. Alford, Rep. Sutherland and Education Committee members, it is a pleasure to be here today.

When the Maine Children's Alliance published our two reports on education reform in 2006 and 2008, both called "A Case for Cooperation," this is the kind of legislation we had in mind.

School cooperatives have been used successfully in several other states, and we believe they will work well in Maine.

I would like to emphasize three points about cooperatives, among the many that speakers here today will point out.

- Cooperatives are voluntary. School districts can come together in whatever form they like to find collaborative ways to do things better.
- Cooperatives are flexible. They can be tailored to any geographic region of the state, and can join districts even that are not neighbors but may have common interests.
- And cooperatives allow schools to be creative. Without changing the way schools are administered, they permit the sharing of resources in the classroom and outside it. They build on the strengths of existing programs and curriculums, and allow schools to share what they've learned with others.

You might ask whether, after two years of planning for consolidated districts and votes to establish 24 new regional districts, this legislation is necessary.

We believe it is. While many school districts that were subject to the consolidation law have found new partners, many have not. Even in areas where consolidation plans were rejected, school district leaders have said that they know they need to do something. They just don't believe that the consolidation law will work for them.

This legislation provides new tools, new techniques, to help those districts. It will also allow districts that were not required to consolidate to form cooperatives in their areas.

The goals of the Maine Children's Alliance for elementary and secondary public education are straightforward. We believe that all children in our state deserve the best possible chance to get an excellent education. Anything schools can do that permits them to deploy their resources toward this goal has our support.

By pooling those resources, by allowing schools to find the best classroom programs and the best ways to do business with support services, this bill will promote better education. And it will allow schools to be more efficient, to preserve these scarce resources and focus directly on learning.

There have been successful cooperatives in Maine before, but many of them have been short-term and have lasted only as long as the individuals who created them stayed on the job. We believe that Maine must start planning for the long-term in education, and the cooperatives that are created through this legislation should also be long-lasting, while changing and growing to meet new needs.

You will hear from other speakers this afternoon about successful cooperative efforts in Maine, efforts that now need to be strengthened and reaffirmed. I would particularly like to acknowledge the leadership of the Maine Superintendents Association, which has stood behind this legislation and is pledging to make it work in their regions.

I'd also like to thank Pat Sutherland for having the wisdom to want to move this policy forward and identifying the concept on her own, without even knowing that the Maine Children's Alliance was trying to develop support for just this sort of policy in this session. We are grateful for Representative Sutherland's leadership for kids and education and look forward to working with the entire legislature to move this bill to enactment.

This bill is only a start toward the creation of active and productive school cooperative organizations. Much will depend on how it is implemented in the months and years to come. But it is an important start indeed.

The pressing issues we wrote about in "A Case for Cooperation" are even more pressing now. Enrollment continues to decline in Maine elementary and secondary schools. Costs continue to rise. And funding has become extremely limited. Cooperatives can help in all these areas.

We urge this committee to give this bill its strong endorsement. We think it is one of the most important pieces of legislation you will consider this year. With your help, we can do a great deal for children everywhere in Maine. It's not often that we have such an excellent chance.