

Report touts RSU 1 as planning model

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BATH — A report issued this week by the Maine Children's Alliance focuses on the creation of Regional School Unit 1, and how the district has been able to succeed while so many school consolidation efforts elsewhere in the state have struggled.

Douglas Rooks, director of the Maine Children's Alliance's Education Project, authored the report, titled "Education First: How the Bath Area Made Reorganization Work."

Rooks told The Times Record on Wednesday that RSU 1 — which serves Bath, West Bath, Phippsburg, Arrowsic and Woolwich — benefited from being a locally initiated merger with its own customized legislation.

Many other school consolidation efforts around Maine, in comparison, have been forced by the state and guided by a general regionalization law that works well for some and poorly for others.

In 2007, the Legislature passed two laws pertaining to the regionalization of school districts. One applied specifically to the efforts of the Bath school department and the nearby communities of School Union 47 to merge into a single district, while the other mandated that all school systems in the state work toward consolidations with regional partners.

The locally specific law ultimately allowed for the formation of RSU 1, which also gained support at the polls from residents of Bath and four of the five Union 47 towns. Residents of Georgetown voted against joining the new regional district.

The details of that reorganization were in the works for years, and the particulars of the local school governance model were largely ironed out before the merger law was passed.

Rooks theorizes that the preliminary work local organizers did to create RSU 1 makes the district a model for consolidation efforts across the state.

"It's not impossible to do these plans, but they present a lot of issues that are probably local in nature," said Rooks, who also writes the weekly Re:Maine column that appears Thursday in The Times Record. "One of the things we were hoping to show is how the process goes when you do have local impetus, as opposed to when the state says, 'We think you should do this.'"

"The more meticulous the planning is, the more likely things are going to work out the way you want," he continued. "They showed that all the work that went into it was worthwhile."

The alliance's study is based on interviews with RSU 1 Superintendent William Shuttleworth, as well as school board members, administrators and service providers. The report also takes into consideration a Maine Children's Alliance analysis of the district's budget and program offerings, according to a release from the organization.

The document follows RSU 1's creation through the end of its first official year of operation, which concluded on June 30.

"It's gone pretty well," Rooks said of the district's early months. "The real advantage to the process the Bath area went through is they really considered tough issues up front rather than saying 'This is a reason we can't do it,' or simply deferring on (them)."

Among those difficult issues were cost-sharing and how to ensure equity on the district's new governing board. RSU 1 adopted a cost-sharing formula that equally weighs property valuations, student populations and overall resident populations.

But Rooks offered particularly high marks for the district's board of directors. In its infancy, RSU 1 faced the challenge of ensuring that the smaller communities — most notably, Arrowsic — would not be overshadowed in board votes.

At the same time, the district founders had to make sure the size and influence of the biggest community — Bath, which pays the most in education costs and serves as home to the greatest number of the school facilities — are recognized.

As a result, RSU 1's early organizers drew up seven "wards" of sorts, each of which spans at least two of the municipalities in the school system. Representatives to the governing board would have to answer to constituents in at least two of the towns in the RSU, while all of the wards were made to contain at least a sliver of Bath.

"I think the single most innovative aspect of the plan was the regional voting system," Rooks said. "The Bath system does that in a very unique way. I've never seen another system like that. To me, that's an innovation that would probably smooth out all of the 'This town wants this and we don't want that' arguments."

The report also highlights educational gains derived from the creation of RSU 1. While observing that "the state law is framed around administrative changes, and education is barely mentioned," Rooks notes that in RSU 1 "the emphasis from the beginning was on reinvesting those savings in improved educational programming and classroom teaching."

Among the educational enhancements Rooks lists are the addition of three Advanced Placement classes at Morse High School during RSU 1's first year; plans to add three more AP classes in the coming year; the hiring of a senior projects coordinator for the high school; expanded foreign language offerings, beginning as early as second grade; more emphasis on literacy throughout the school system; and introduction of a pre-school program for 50 to 60 children this fall.

Woolwich resident Charles Durfee, chairman of the RSU 1 board, told Rooks, “We’ve been able to do it mostly within the existing budget.”

The Maine Children’s Alliance plans to make the report available in the near future. For more information on the organization, go online to www.mekids.org