

Published: Tuesday, July 14, 2009 2:11 PM EDT

The Maine Children's Alliance's newly released report on Regional School Unit 1 highlights two factors that have been largely absent from state government's focus on implementing school consolidation: education and compromise.

Douglas Rooks, whose weekly column Re:Maine, appears Thursdays in The Times Record, compiled the report. This newspaper had no involvement with its production, but we applaud many of the findings. Rooks has been a keen observer of state government for more than two decades, and his institutional memory and rare ability to place contemporary political issues in historical context add important insight to public discourse.

Release of the report, titled "Education First: How the Bath area made reorganization work," was timed to coincide with the advent of 25 new regional school districts in Maine on July 1. Rooks characterizes the launch of Maine's new regional school districts as "the greatest change in Maine local governance since the passage of the Sinclair Act in 1957, when the first regional government entities were formed."

RSU 1 debuted on July 1, 2008, so the report analyzes its early experience with consolidation as a primer for other districts. The report acknowledges that "each new regional district will need to find its own solutions to the numerous challenges provided by reorganization." It then notes that RSU 1 overcame its initial challenges through a series of significant compromises that ultimately yielded a unique local approach specifically designed to create better learning environments for all students in the district's disparate communities.

"Though the five-municipality school merger did create considerable administrative savings through closing one central office, the emphasis from the beginning was on reinvesting those savings in improved educational programming and classroom teaching. The state law is framed around administrative changes, and education is barely mentioned."

While the Baldacci administration, legislators and most of the other Mainers who joined the consolidation discussion devoted attention almost exclusively to finding savings, RSU 1 officials focused on how the dividends of administrative streamlining and economies of scale could be used to improve quality of education. As a result, the district has been able to beef up Advanced

Placement options at Morse High School; expand literacy and foreign language programs; align curriculum; and add pre-school offerings.

In so doing, RSU 1 confronted the “loss of school choice” concern that spurred some opposition by making Morse a much more desirable choice.

Likewise, by devising district-wide rather than municipality-based funding and school board representation systems, RSU 1 has, to date, avoided the divisive wrangling encountered by other nascent regional collaborations, most notably RSU 5 in Freeport, Pownal and Durham.

As any attentive student in a science class at Bath Middle School could explain, we haven’t collected enough test data to declare the RSU 1 experiment a success. However, by setting aside provincial concerns for the common goal of a better overall educational system, RSU 1 demonstrates that, rather than protecting the status quo, local control allows those who have the most intimate knowledge of each school system’s specific character and challenges to address them directly and efficiently — far more so than could an awkward sprawling bureaucracy like state government.

letters@timesrecord.com