

Maine Issue Brief

Published by The Maine Heritage Policy Center

No. 34

October 27, 2008

UPDATE: 16 Reorganization Plans and the Threat to School Choice

by Stephen Bowen, M.Ed.
Director, Center for Education Excellence

As The Maine Heritage Policy Center has previously reported, opportunities for Maine families to choose the schools their children attend are in danger as a result of the ongoing school district consolidation effort. For generations, families living in communities without a high school were allowed to send their children to a public or private school of their choice, paid for with public funds under Maine's "town tuitioning" system. The district consolidation law, however, requires there be a public high school in every school district, and while the consolidation law nominally protects school choice where it has traditionally been available, school choice has been lost due to consolidation in the Bath area, and is threatened in other districts across Maine.

In July, we released a list of what we felt to be the 15 consolidation plans that posed the greatest potential threat to school choice. In developing that list, we first identified those school districts where choice is available and widely practiced, and then reviewed the consolidation proposals involving those districts, many of which were still under development at that time.

Now, three months later, most of the consolidation plans are near completion. For supporters of school choice, the results are mixed. A review of these updated consolidation plans indicates that school choice will indeed remain in place in a number of districts, but faces outright elimination in others. In two towns, the question of preserving school choice will go before voters.

We have reorganized the list of consolidation plans, beginning with those in which school choice faces its greatest threat. We have also added a sixteenth consolidation plan to our list, one that threatens school choice in the town of Orland.

◆ School Choice to be lost if consolidation plan is approved by voters:

Freeport/MSAD 62 (Pownal)/Durham: The reorganization plan to merge these three districts would phase out school choice for Durham and Pownal. Voters in both Durham and Pownal have already agreed to exclusive tuitioning contracts with neighboring Freeport, which all but guarantees the end of school choice for those towns. Durham's 200 high schoolers attended six different schools last year, while Pownal's 68 high schoolers attended five different schools. All will be required to attend Freeport High School under the merger plan to be put before voters in the three districts on November 4.

MSAD 23 (Carmel/Levant)/Hermon: Today, the nearly 300 high school students in MSAD 23 can attend a high school of their choice with a waiver from the school board. Under the proposed consolidation plan, those students currently taking advantage of this choice option will be allowed to continue attending the school of their choice, but the waiver provision is to be eliminated, effectively ending any school choice options for other MSAD 23 students, both now and into the future. This choice-ending plan is undergoing final revisions before being submitted to the Department of Education for approval.

MSAD 38(Etna/Dixmont)/MSAD 48(Corinna, Hartland, Newport, Palmyra, Plymouth and St. Albans): Like MSAD 23, MSAD 38 has historically allowed school choice under a waiver system. The current plan for its merger with neighboring MSAD 48 would eliminate that choice option for the 125 high school students in MSAD 38, though the plan will allow students attending other schools today to continue to do so. Interestingly, this reorganization plan is notable for its hostility toward school choice, a sentiment made clear by the plan's assertion that it "in no way constitutes present or future school choice." Not only no school choice now, it would appear, but no hope for school choice ever. The plan goes before voters November 4.

◆ School Choice to go before voters:

Bucksport/Orland/SAD 18: Most high school students from the town of Orland attend Bucksport High School, but Orland has historically allowed school choice for a limited number of high schoolers. A citizen's initiative to eliminate school choice goes before the Orland voters on November 4. If it passes, all Orland high schoolers will be forced to attend Bucksport High School whether the two districts merge or not. Unsurprisingly, school and municipal leaders in neighboring Bucksport have actively campaigned against school choice for Orland, which has complicated the work of school choice supporters.

We the people of Maine...

THE MAINE HERITAGE POLICY CENTER

Raymond/Windham: Raymond's proximity to a number of excellent schools makes it one of the state's best choice communities. If school choice is lost in Pownal, Raymond would then be the only town in populous Cumberland County to offer school choice. Under pressure from choice opponents, however, the town is putting school choice before voters on November 4. A defeat would end choice in Raymond forever, before consolidation even happens.

◆ **Implications for School Choice unknown**

Boothbay-Boothbay Harbor CSD/Bremen/Bristol/Damariscotta/Edgecomb/Great Salt Bay CSD/Jefferson/Newcastle/Nobleboro/South Bristol/Southport: Boothbay and Boothbay Harbor do not have choice, but the others do. These districts are currently developing an Alternative Organizational Plan, the details of which have not been released.

Brewer/Dedham/Orrington/MSAD 63 (Holden, Eddington, Clifton): Brewer does not have school choice, but the remaining towns do. Dedham's 84 high schoolers attended six different schools last year, Orrington's 225 attended six as well, and MSAD 63's 311 attended seven. The merger plan for these districts is still under development.

Acton: Acton's 125 high schoolers attended four different schools last year, but the town has apparently made no merger plans, leaving the future of school choice there unknown.

◆ **School Choice explicitly protected in merger plans**

Sedgwick/Penobscot/Deer Isle-Stonington CSD/Brooksville/Brooklin/Blue Hill/Castine/Surry: Deer Isle and Stonington do not have choice, but the other towns do. According to the merger plan under development there, "nothing in this plan shall affect school choice within the member municipalities."

Hancock/Lamoine/Mariaville/Otis/MSAD 26: All of these Hancock County districts offer school choice, and will keep those choice options under the provisions of their proposed merger with Ellsworth and four other districts.

MSAD 47/China With its 300 high schoolers having attended seven schools last year, China is one of the state's leading school choice communities. It will keep school choice under the terms of its proposed consolidation with MSAD 47. The future for school choice in nearby **Vassalboro** is unknown, as its merger with Waterville and Winslow is under development.

Alna/Wiscasset/Westport Island/Palermo/Somerville/Whitefield/Windsor/Chelsea: Of this group, only Wiscasset does not have choice. According to the proposed merger plan, "All school choice policies...will be preserved."

Alton/Bradley/Greenbush/Milford/Old Town: Only Old Town is without choice in this group. According to a draft of the reorganization plan dated September 25, 2008, "the existing districts that have choice of schools as of the operational date shall continue to have the same choices in the RSU."

Orono/Veazie/Glenburn: Orono does not have school choice, but Veazie's 113 high schoolers attended four different schools last year and Glenburn's 260 attended seven. The two towns "shall continue to have a choice of any state approved high school" under the provisions of the most recent merger plan.

Wesley/Northfield/Marshfield/Whitneyville/Roque Bluffs/Machias/Jonesboro/East Machias/Whiting/Cutler/Machiasport/MSAD 19(Lubec): Of these Washington County towns, only MSAD 19 does not have choice. According to the merger plan, "grade levels in the existing districts that have a choice of schools as of the operational date shall continue to have the same choices."

SAD 71 (Kennebunk, Kennebunkport)/Arundel: Arundel is one of Maine's better school choice communities; its 370 high schoolers attended seven different schools last year. According to the consolidation plan, "choice of schools will be preserved for Arundel's grade 9 to 12 students."

Note: These plans may change as consolidation efforts move forward, so choice supporters should remain vigilant. Clearly, the effort to save school choice in Maine is far from over.

Sources:

The Maine Department of Education was the source for both the student counts of the choice districts and the details of reorganization plans.

Stephen Bowen is the director of the Center for Education Excellence. He may be reached via email at sbowen@mainepolicy.org.

All information is from sources considered reliable, but may be subject to inaccuracies, omissions, and modifications.

The Maine Heritage Policy Center is a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit, nonpartisan research and educational organization based in Portland, Maine. The Maine Heritage Policy Center promotes prosperity for all Maine people by advocating for free enterprise, limited government and individual liberty in the areas of economic growth, taxes and fiscal matters, health care, education, constitutional law and open government. Contributions to MHPC are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

© 2008 The Maine Heritage Policy Center. Material from this document may be copied and distributed with proper citation.

P.O. Box 7829, Portland, ME 04112, Phone: 207.321.2550 Fax: 207.773.4385

<http://www.mainepolicy.org>

http://mainepolicy.org/mhpc_blog

info@mainepolicy.org