

# Maine Issue Brief

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## District Consolidation and the Threat to School Choice: 15 Reorganization Plans to Watch

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As The Maine Heritage Policy Center reported in a recent policy brief titled *Reorganization and the Threat to Maine's Tradition of School Choice*, opportunities for families to choose the schools their children attend are in danger as a result of the ongoing school district consolidation effort. For generations, students in many Maine communities have been allowed to choose the school they attend under the state's "town tuitioning" program. The competition between schools that has resulted from these opportunities for school choice has been proven to result in higher quality schools and improved student outcomes. Unfortunately, the current school district consolidation effort has put these choice options at risk and has already resulted in the loss of school choice options in four of the towns that now comprise the very first regionalized school district, RSU 1 in Bath.

While opportunities for school choice exist in towns across Maine, the specific areas of the state where choice is most threatened have become more apparent as updated reorganization plans continue to be submitted to the state Department of Education. There are communities like Pownal and Durham, for instance, that have proposed to eliminate school choice entirely. Others, such as Carmel and Levant, plan to end waiver programs that have allowed for school choice options in the past. Raymond continues to debate whether or not to keep school choice at all as it looks to attract a consolidation partner.

The consolidation proposals involving these towns are but three of the fifteen merger plans deserving more careful scrutiny by school choice supporters. In assembling the following list, we first identified those school districts where choice is available and widely practiced, and then reviewed the reorganization proposals involving those districts. Merger plans have yet to be authored in some and are near completion in others, but, as these communities provide some of the best opportunities for school choice in the state, consolidation developments in each should be watched closely.

Will the opportunities for school choice that Maine students have enjoyed for generations continue as district consolidation efforts move forward, or will those opportunities be lost? The answer depends to a large degree on what happens with the following fifteen merger proposals. Merger plans are to go before voters within a few months.

### Cumberland County

**1. Raymond/Windham:** Raymond has been debating eliminating the choice options it has in anticipation of merging with Windham. Its 260 high schoolers attend seven different schools, making it one of the state's best choice communities. It is also one of the few communities in the southern part of the state to offer school choice options.

**2. Freeport/MSAD 62 (Pownal)/Durham:** The reorganization plan now in place would eliminate choice for Durham and Pownal. Durham's 200 high schoolers attend six different schools, while Pownal's 68 high schoolers attend five different schools. Eventually, all would be required to attend Freeport High School under the proposed merger.

### Hancock County

**3. Sedgwick/Penobscot/Deer Isle-Stonington CSD/Brooksville/Brooklin/Blue Hill/Castine:** Deer Isle and Stonington do not have choice, but the other towns do. Blue Hill students alone attend nine different high schools. The choice issue has proven divisive in merger talks there and a reorganization plan has yet to be developed.

**4. Hancock/Lamoine/Mariaville/Otis/Surry/Trenton/MSAD 26(Eastbrook, Waltham):** All of these Hancock County towns offer school choice, and, with their proximity to Mount Desert Island, Ellsworth, Bucksport, and the Bangor area, have a number of school choice options. They have yet to develop any detailed merger plans.

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**Kennebec County**

**5. MSAD 47/China/Vassalboro/Winslow:** China and Vassalboro are both leading school choice towns. China's 300 high schoolers attend seven schools, Vassalboro's 250 attend nine. The other towns have no school choice, and the choice issue has been a subject of extensive debate there.

**Lincoln County**

**6. Boothbay-Boothbay Harbor CSD/Bremen/Bristol/Damariscotta/Edgecomb/Great Salt Bay CSD/Jefferson/Newcastle/Nobleboro/South Bristol/Southport:** Most of these are choice towns, though Boothbay and Boothbay Harbor are not. Towns in this group like Jefferson, whose students attend eight different schools, are among the state's better choice communities.

**7. Alna/Wiscasset/Westport Island/Palermo/Somerville/Whitefield/Windsor/Chelsea:** Of this group, only Wiscasset does not have choice. Many of the others are leading choice towns: Chelsea's students attend six schools, Windsor's six, and Whitefield's ten. Merger plans have yet to be developed.

**Penobscot County**

**8. Alton/Bradley/Greenbush/Milford/Old Town:** Only Old Town is without choice in this group. Alton's 40 students attend five schools, Greenbush's 80 attend five, and Milford's 145 attend four.

**9. Orono/Veazie/Glenburn:** Veazie's 113 students attend four different schools, Glenburn's 260 attend seven. Orono does not have school choice, and the choice issue has been subject of some debate.

**10. 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, they will lose that option.

**11. Brewer/Dedham/Orrington/MSAD 63 (Holden, Eddington, Clifton):** Brewer does not have school choice, but the remaining towns do. Dedham's 84 high schoolers attend six different schools, Orrington's 225 attend six as well, and MSAD 63's 311 attend seven. Choice has been an issue for this area in the past.

**12. MSAD 38(Etna/Dixmont)/MSAD 48(Corinna, Hartland, Newport, Palmyra, Plymouth and St. Albans):** MSAD 38 allows school choice under a waiver system. The proposed consolidation plan would merge MSAD 38 with neighboring MSAD 48, and would eliminate that choice option for the 125 high school students in MSAD 38.

**Washington County**

**13. 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. Students in these towns generally attend one of only two available high schools, and merger plans have yet to be developed.

**York County**

**14. Acton:** Acton has yet to find a consolidation partner, but their 125 high schoolers currently attend four different schools. School choice has been an issue for the town in the past, but has been preserved despite attempts to eliminate it.

**15. SAD 71 (Kennebunk, Kennebunkport)/Arundel:** Arundel is one of Maine better school choice communities; its 370 high schoolers attend seven different schools. It is merging with SAD 71, which does not offer school choice, and consolidation plans are still in development.

Details on the reorganization plans submitted by these and other school units are available at the Department of Education's <http://www.maine.gov/education> website. Choice supporters should stay tuned as consolidation efforts continue.

**Sources:**

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

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

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