

The Maine View

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New York's BOCES System: A Model for Maine?

By Stephen Bowen, M.Ed.

Under the provisions of the school district reorganization law passed last spring, school and community leaders had until December 1 of this year to develop proposals to merge the state's school administrative units, with the hope of saving millions of taxpayer dollars. As the deadline passed, the enormous challenge of completely redesigning the means by which the state's schools are governed was clear. The task is not even close to being done. In an appearance before the legislature's Education and Cultural Affairs Committee on October 30th, Education Commissioner Susan Gendron testified that to her knowledge not a single one of the reorganization plans currently under development would be completed by the December deadline, much less be ready to go before voters in January, as the new law dictates.

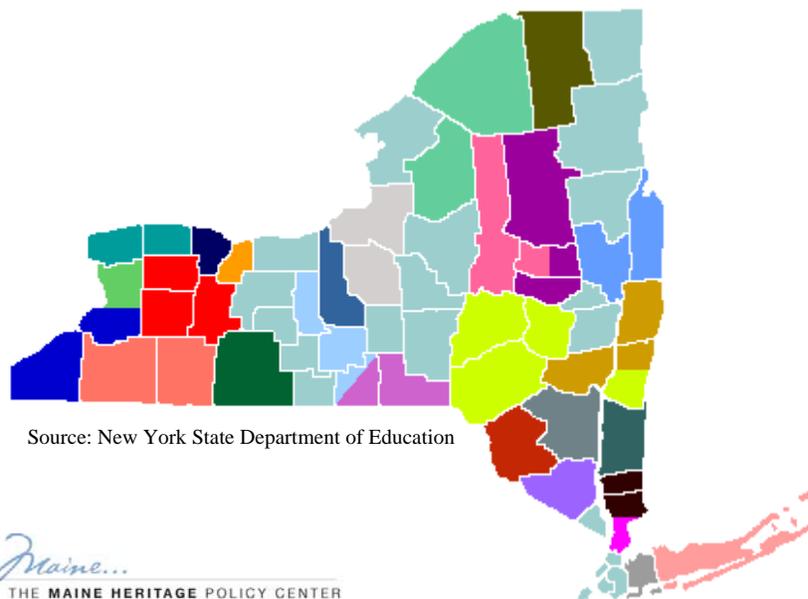
Instead, the state's newspapers are filled daily with stories of frustration. The proposed mergers are creating massive cost shifts that nobody seems to know how to deal with. Local officials complain that the state seems unable to provide them with the data necessary to move forward. Questions of district governance, the ownership of school property, and the future of school choice options seem to be almost impossible to sort out.

Worst of all, nearly all of these problems could have been avoided, had the law simply allowed for collaboration instead of consolidation. Despite the fact that nearly all of the savings that state officials want can be found through what might be called "functional consolidation," state leaders insist that the school units themselves be merged as well, with widespread confusion and discontent as a result.

Those looking for a better approach need look no further than the state of New York, which included a provision in a 1948 education law that allowed for the creation of Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, or BOCES. At the time, it was anticipated that the BOCES boards would be an intermediate step, paving the way for the creation of the kind of super-sized districts being envisioned for Maine. But New York never got there. Instead, the BOCES themselves become the vehicles by which the state's school systems shared resources, cut costs, and improved schools.

Could a BOCES-style approach be a better way for Maine?

New York's BOCES System



Background

Like most states, post-World War II New York found itself with a hopelessly outdated school system that poorly served its people, especially those in rural areas. Reformers suggested consolidating existing school districts into “intermediate districts” that would be able to provide needed services to the state’s rural communities. The law allowing for the creation of those districts put the BOCES boards into place, with the intent that they would work to develop the shared services to one day be managed by the new intermediate districts.[1]

The intermediate districts, though, were never formed. Because of the complexity of merging the existing districts, and because the “bottom-up” structure of the BOCES allowed them to be customized by local districts to meet their individual needs, new BOCES boards were created with dizzying speed. By 1958, just ten years after the law’s enactment, there were 82 BOCES boards in place across New York.

In the mid 1960’s the law governing BOCES was amended to allow them to own property. This led to the construction of regional centers that provided such services as vocational and technical education and instructional support services. From then on, the BOCES system would be a critical component of New York’s educational system.[2]

The BOCES system today

According to the New York’s Department of Education, there are now 38 BOCES boards across the state, and “all but 9 of the 698 operating school districts in New York are members of a BOCES. The 38 BOCES served a total of 1,633,631 students in the 2004-2005 school year.”[3]

An analysis of the spending of New York’s BOCES by that state’s Department of Education reveals the many ways in that the BOCES system provides services to its school systems.

As shown in Chart 1, fully 40 percent of BOCES expenditures today involve special education services. Because these services can be especially costly for individual districts to offer on their own, special education is regionalized through the BOCES system, allowing for greater access to needed services at

lower cost. BOCES also does a great deal of non-instructional support work, such as accounting, human resources, transportation, and administrative services. Instructional support services, which account for 16 percent of BOCES services statewide, include teacher training and support, Instructional Technology, and library and media services. New York’s BOCES system also provides nearly all of the state’s Career and Technical Education services, and many BOCES operate facilities specifically for this purpose. Eight percent of statewide BOCES spending is on general education services such as programs for Gifted and Talented students, as well as arts education offerings. The final 5 percent of BOCES spending involves support for itinerant teachers and staff who work across several districts. These include music and art teachers, school nurses, and substitute teachers.[4]

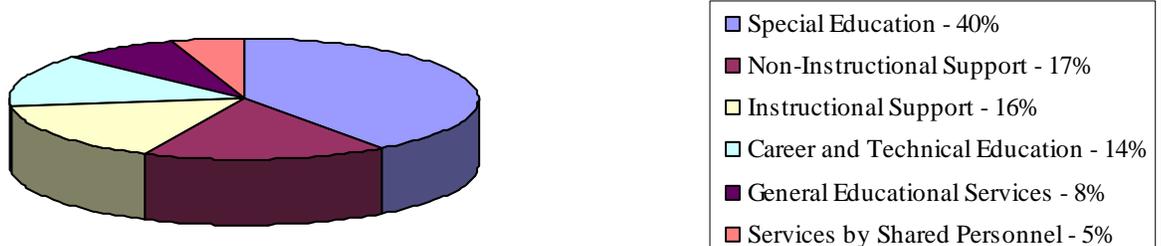
According to a 2000 study, New York’s BOCES boards are also “critical” in helping students to reach the state’s high academic standards.

“BOCES serve as a clearinghouse for information, a forum for discussion, and a resource for staff development. BOCES staff members search out models of best practices, arrange staff development for local school districts, write grants to support local change and build state resource centers. In fact, New York State’s Education Commissioner has stated several times that the state’s transformation to a standards-based curriculum could not occur without BOCES units to assist local districts.”[5]

New York’s school districts have learned to use the BOCES system to improve the availability and quality of the educational services they offer, while cutting costs at the same time.

As a result, New York has been able to focus more of its resources into the classroom. According to a 2007 study by the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education, New York leads the nation in the percent of overall education spending dedicated to student instruction.[6]

Chart 1
Categories of Expenditures by New York BOCES, 2004-2005



Source: New York State Department of Education

Case Study: The Broome-Tioga BOCES

A prime example of what a BOCES is capable of can be found in the Susquehanna Valley of Southern New York. The Broome-Tioga BOCES, formed in 1954, provides educational services to 15 school districts across two counties. More than 38,000 students are served by the schools in that region, and the BOCES provides adult education services to 12,000 adults as well. The BOCES describes itself as having three basic educational service areas. [7]

- The BOCES provides “educational support and technology” by being responsible for providing teacher training and staff development, instructional programming and support, and computer and media services for the districts it serves. BOCES offices provide financial management as well as student records and data processing, including data collection for the state Department of Education. It operates all Information Technology services for its districts, including technical support and teacher training. It manages library and media services for its districts and operates a Leadership Academy in cooperation with Binghamton University, which provides staff development opportunities for teachers and administrators.
- The Broome-Tioga BOCES also provides centralized administrative services for the 15 districts it serves, including human resources services. The BOCES handles contract negotiations and labor relations, deals with payroll and benefits management, and handles certification for teachers. It provides budget and accounting services, and the kind of professional business management that no small district could provide on its own. The BOCES even provides a substitute teacher placement service.
- Lastly, the Broome-Tioga BOCES provides educational services directly. It manages and provides Special Education and Alternative Education services, including mental health treatment and transitional programs. It handles services that would be very costly for individual districts to offer on their own, such as speech and language therapy, services for the visually and hearing impaired, and occupational therapy. The BOCES also provides career and technical programming in 25 career areas and works in cooperation with the private sector to provide industry and employer-specific job training.

With all that, it should come as no surprise that a 2004 study of the Broome-Tioga BOCES by the New York-based Center for Governmental Research (CGR) found that “the Broome-Tioga region is blessed with high quality public schools” and that “the districts have worked well together through the BOCES to develop regional approaches that provide opportunities that otherwise might not be available to students and staff.” The report singled out the Broome-Tioga BOCES Central Business Office for particular praise, calling it “a model for the state.”

Indeed, when asked to study ways in which the schools of the Broome-Tioga region might work better together, the CGR study suggested that school districts be “more aggressive in exploring ways” to share services using the BOCES model, concluding that “most if not all of districts would be able to profit from both the quality and scope of the services available.”[8]

This comes despite the fact that the state maintains nearly 700 school districts.

How a BOCES works

In stark contrast to the state-imposed school district consolidation mandate now facing school and community leaders in Maine, the BOCES system retains decision-making by local school boards.

The BOCES were never imposed on local districts, but were formed when such districts decided to share services. Today, if the existing area BOCES already offers the needed service, the local boards are then able to contract with the BOCES to provide that service to them. Otherwise, local districts can request that the BOCES provide the service that they require. Sometimes services are available from more than one BOCES, and districts can choose the best one to meet their needs.

Importantly, local school boards are not mandated under New York law to be a part of a BOCES, nor are they required to make use of every service that an area BOCES offers. These freedoms allow local districts to make use of the regionalized services that best meet their needs, while maintaining local community control over schools.

In terms of funding, BOCES boards have no independent taxing authority or dedicated stream of revenue. Services are paid for by the member districts on a fee-for-service basis. Each district pays a set amount to cover administrative costs for the area BOCES, but is otherwise free to purchase only the regionalized services it needs and it pays for them on that basis. In order to encourage the use of the BOCES system, the state of New York helps fund the provision of some services through the BOCES, such as vocational education services. [9]

The BOCES itself is governed by a board comprised of one representative from each of the member school districts. In this

way, the management of the BOCES is kept at the local level and remains responsive to local needs. Each BOCES is required to publish a yearly “report card” describing its activities in order to improve accountability and oversight. [10]

A Model for Maine

Could New York’s BOCES system be a better model for Maine than the current consolidation approach?

The fact that New York ultimately abandoned the exact kind of district consolidation scheme that Maine is now forcing on its own school districts suggests that it might be. New York’s BOCES system was initially developed as a first step to consolidation, but proved so successful at generating savings and improving services, (without all the trouble of actually merging the districts), that New York never took that last step.

Instead, they now enjoy the benefits of “functional consolidation,” such as better services and lower costs, without any of the financial and governance problems that actually merging the districts creates, the very same problems school and community leaders in Maine are struggling mightily to solve today.

Indeed, nearly all of the problems bedeviling district reorganization efforts currently underway would vanish using this approach. Because the districts would remain independent, there would be no controversy regarding who has school choice and who does not. Since districts pay for BOCES services on a fee basis, there would be no labyrinthine school financing issues to resolve. The governance system for a BOCES is so simple it could be worked out in a single meeting. The state’s Vocational Education regions are already in place, and could serve as a firm foundation on which to build a more complex system for sharing services.

In anticipation of the upcoming legislative session, legislators of both parties submitted dozens of bill to amend or repeal the existing district consolidation law. A citizen’s petition is being circulated to do the same. It is clear that the consolidation approach will simply not work. Luckily, it doesn’t have to. New York’s BOCES system proves that collaborative structures can save money and improve educational services in a far simpler way. It is a better approach for Maine to take.

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Stephen L. Bowen is a former public school teacher, a former state legislator, and is the education policy analyst at the Maine Heritage Policy Center. The author can be reached at sbowen@mainepolicy.org.

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Editor and director of communications, Jason A. Fortin.

P.O. Box 7829
Portland, ME 04112
207.321.2550 (p)
207.773.4385 (f)

<http://www.mainepolicy.org>
<http://blog.mainepolicy.org>
info@mainepolicy.org

Additional MHPC Staff:	Sandy Cleveland <i>Executive Assistant</i>
Bill Becker <i>President & Chief Executive Officer</i>	J. Scott Moody <i>Vice President of Policy and Chief Economist</i>
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