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*How the Bath Area
Made Reorganization Work*

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ON JULY 1, TWENTY-FIVE NEW REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS WILL BEGIN OPERATIONS. While the statewide debate over the school consolidation law passed in 2007 as part of the state budget is unresolved – a citizen initiative to repeal the law will be voted on Nov. 3 – the local impacts are already profound.

The 25 new school districts represent the greatest change in Maine local governance since the passage of the Sinclair Act in 1957, when the first regional government entities were formed. Throughout its history, Maine has relied almost entirely on its state and municipal governments. Counties provide far fewer services here than in most other states, and other regional agencies tend to be ad hoc or non-governmental. So the attempt to reorganize schools could have important implications for other services traditionally offered by government, including everything from fire protection and policing to road maintenance and trash disposal.

Since the scale of reorganization going on right now falls outside the living memory of most Mainers, the progress of the first new regional school unit to be formed is of more than ordinary interest. It was created a year earlier than the other districts as a result of a local effort started before the statewide law was passed.

The Lower Kennebec Regional School District, designated RSU 1 by the state, came into being on July 1, 2008. It reflects all the features designated in the state consolidation law, and its legislative charter also includes several other provisions designed to harmonize previous practices in the member municipalities' schools, and to help create a regional, rather than a strictly local outlook, from the start.

While each new regional district will need to find its own solutions to the numerous challenges provided by reorganization — and the gains and losses that always result from such changes — the answers found by studying and learning from RSU 1 are well worth examining.

This report is based on interviews with administrators, teachers, school board members, and contract service providers in the area, and research into school reorganization in Maine over two generations, as well as study of the most recent legislative actions on this subject.

The communities that formed RSU 1 – the city of Bath and the smaller surrounding towns of Woolwich, West Bath, Phippsburg and Arrowsic – were authorized to do so by LD 910, a private and special law enacted in 2007, just before statewide consolidation, from which these communities were exempt. Like the statewide law, there is an emphasis on administrative efficiencies, equitable cost-sharing among the member communities, and unified provision of non-classroom services. Unlike the state law, RSU 1's charter also provided for a phase-out of school choice options outside the new district and the provision of comprehensive school choice within it. It also established regional voting districts for school board elections that cross the boundaries of two or even three towns, rather than establish seats by towns, as practiced in other RSUs and the earlier SADs (school administrative districts) established under the Sinclair Act.

Perhaps the most important difference, however, came during the organization and first year's experience in the district. 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. Financial gains have been achieved by RSU 1 – the second unified budget, for 2009-10, shows a 1% decline over the first – but the communities' primary concerns lay elsewhere.

The most important local concerns were governance of Morse High School and the Bath Middle School, the regional schools for most of the outlying towns, and the quality of programs there; adequate financial support for all of the region's schools; and higher standards for curriculum in both elementary and secondary programs. In the first two years of planning and implementation, significant progress has been made toward these goals.

A New School Board

Charles Durfee, a former Woolwich school board member and the first chair of the RSU 1 regional board, was asked what conditions are necessary to launch a successful cooperative effort. He said the plan for a merger that was created by a designated transition team was important, but that the communities in question had to share common geographic and

Students from the Phippsburg Elementary School show off books used as part of their "Read to Feed" community service project.



cultural interests. “If you’re not willing to compromise, this is never going to work,” he said. “If you think every idea you have is the best, then don’t sit down at the table.”

It wasn’t easy to craft these kinds of compromises, even though the Lower Kennebec communities already had geographic and cultural similarities, and many students attended the same school. At one time, the five surrounding communities (including Georgetown, which ultimately decided not to join the new district) and Bath shared a common superintendent and central office as Union 47. School unions are a loose form of organization that has now been superseded in Maine law, which recognizes only RSUs and municipal school departments.

Bath later chose its own superintendent and withdrew from the union, but some of the educational issues discussed in the communities were intensified by the breakup. The outlying towns, which paid tuition for students to attend Morse High School and Bath Middle School, often expressed concern that they had no role in these schools’ governance, and some believed that the physical plants were being neglected. In recent years, Bath believed that tuition payments no longer covered the cost of the education being offered at its schools, and that lack of consistent enrollment, which varied from year to year, made it difficult to budget for improvements.

There were additional differences. While it has a relatively high valuation per pupil due to Bath Iron Works and other large commercial enterprises, Bath also has a relatively large proportion of low-income families. Most of the other towns are predominately residential, with the other coastal towns – Phippsburg, Arrowsic and Woolwich – receiving minimum state subsidies.

The financial agreement that created the merger balanced these interests by including Bath’s debt for its school buildings – including a \$2.9 million bond for renovations incurred shortly before the regional vote – with a cost-sharing formula that effectively distributed Bath’s state subsidy to the entire district.

But RSU 1 board members say the agreement still might not have been approved in five municipalities without the interest in joint school governance for Morse and the Bath middle school. Some towns prefer to send students to a variety of schools; in the Bath area this common interest in particular schools was seen as more important.

Reflecting this emerging regionalism, the transition team proposed, and the legislation adopted, an unusual voting system, practiced nowhere else in Maine. It elects members across districts composed of parts of at least two and sometimes three towns. Because Bath comprises half the population of the district, this scheme was necessary to avoid Bath-only districts, but it was also seen as desirable because all school board members would have constituents in more than one town.

In practice, the initial elections led to some surprises. Overall turnout was light, but heavier in the smallest town, Arrowsic. On the seven-seat board, two members are from Bath, two from Arrowsic, and one each from West Bath, Woolwich and Phippsburg. “I don’t think anyone could have foreseen that result,” said Julie Rice, vice chair of the board and a former member of the transition team from Bath. “One of the winning candidates was a write-in.”

Nevertheless, the board quickly formed a cohesive working relationship. “There was so much to do, and so little time,” said Charles Durfee.

Superintendent William Shuttleworth, who had that role in both Union 47 and Bath before the merger, said “I haven’t seen any evidence of regional divisions in any of the board’s major decisions.”

Durfee isn’t willing to go quite that far. “You know during our discussions where people come from, and that’s natural. You always start out from where you are. The important thing is that we’re able to balance interests and come to a consensus that feels right.”

“You know during our discussions where people come from, and that’s natural. The important thing is that we’re able to come to a consensus that feels right.”

CHARLES DURFEE
RSU 1 board chairman

Several of the RSUs being formed considered cross-town districts, but none ultimately used them in their initial elections held this spring. That means all of them use the “weighted vote,” a device employed by Maine’s regional districts that, on budgets and other important matters, count one board member’s vote more than another based on the number of constituents in their town or district.

There were, naturally, adjustments to be made as the new board began meeting early last year after the February school board elections, said Frances Tolan, who earlier served on the Arrowsic school board. “There was no one on the board who came saying, ‘This is my agenda. This is what I want.’ People were willing to listen to opinions other than their own, at times even change their minds. Board members respect each other enough so even when we’ve had disagreements, we’ve been OK with the process.”

Julie Rice said that the former school boards had different styles for public input. The Bath board had designated a public comment period during meetings, while the smaller towns tended to allow involvement whenever it seemed relevant. “Some residents wanted to jump in whenever they had a comment,” she said. “They were offended when they weren’t allowed to speak.” It took some time to work out procedures to allow more frequent comment, while still allowing the board to complete its business.

A New Curriculum

When William Shuttleworth took over as Bath superintendent in 2007, three years after becoming Union 47 superintendent, he immediately began comparing programs in the various schools, and made several key findings. One was that improving the curriculum at Morse High School and lowering the dropout rate should be a priority. Another was that students from different towns entered the middle and high schools with widely varying preparation. A third was that there were strengths and weaknesses throughout the schools that were eventually joined together the following year.

To emphasize the new district’s commitment to high school graduation and college preparation, the board added three Advanced Placement courses for Morse in its first year, and three more for next year. The AP roster now includes English, art history, music theory, physics, biology, statistics, calculus, European and U.S. history, human geography, and environmental science.

The district hired a senior projects coordinator, who next year will also take on responsibilities for K-12 literacy. Like other Maine high schools, Shuttleworth said that RSU1 was searching for a cure for “senioritis,” which often takes hold after students have completed college applications. “This has kept everyone involved, right up to graduation. It has electrified our seniors.” Projects include community service as well as academic work.

Literacy has emerged as another significant obstacle to learning, even in secondary school, Shuttleworth said. “Teachers have been so used to instilling content that they don’t always see what their students lack. We can’t afford to assume literacy. If you can’t read the chemistry assignment, you can’t do the work.”

Despite the rain this spring and summer, students continue to work on the RSU 1 community garden, which provides produce for the culinary arts program and local homeless shelters.



Courtesy of the Times Record

At the other end of the spectrum, the district is expanding its pre-school program by another 50-60 students next fall, essentially reaching all the parents who want to enroll their children. Since the state now recognizes pre-school programs for providing subsidy, there will be minimal additional costs to the district.

The district has also extended foreign languages to all elementary schools, French and Spanish, beginning in the second grade. Previously, only Bath offered such an early start. The gifted and talented program has seen similar expansion.

Charles Durfee, the school board chair, said that he appreciates that the expanded curriculum has occurred without substantially increasing costs. "We've been able to do it mostly within the existing budget," he said.

But some reallocation of priorities has been necessary, said Shuttleworth. The AP classes have much smaller enrollments than other courses in the same subject, and foreign language teaching has required more staff. To find the necessary money, the district is discontinuing business programs at the regional vocational center, which had low enrollments, saving \$175,000. "Most of these courses were outdated," he said. "We've found they're better offered in adult education and at the community colleges."

Many of the changes have involved deciding which programs already in use will best suit students district-wide. In Union 47, an elementary program called Everyday Math was successful, but the curriculum coordinator, Nancy Harriman, said Bath teachers were skeptical about using it. "They were resisting until we showed them that the [Union 47] kids were scoring 20 points higher on the MEA. Then they decided we could try it," she said.

Harriman said that some of the most productive curriculum sessions were in the early months, when "People were thrown together and we had to get things up and running in a couple of months." She saw a lot of creative interchanges as teaching veterans were called on to reconsider strategies they'd used for years. In retrospect, "I wish we'd done that for a lot more areas. It really gave us a chance to test what we were doing, and find a better way."

Non-classroom services are improving, too, as a result of the merger process, Julie Rice said. The district is now working to bring the elementary school libraries up to a similar standard, for instance.

Shuttleworth said that despite attempts to coordinate programs throughout the district's seven schools, there will always be room for individual distinctions.

Students at the vocational center build a house every year as part of the construction trades program, with the support of community donors and real estate professionals, annually adding to the stock of affordable housing.

While elementary music classes have been expanded overall, Phippsburg will retain a distinctive school band, Shuttleworth said, "They've always had one of the best bands in the state. They play better than a lot of high school bands."

Compromises on Key Issues

School choice, as it has been elsewhere, was a key issue during negotiations for a new district, and was identified as a topic of concern in several towns before the vote. Only Bath assigned all of its publicly funded students to schools within the city. In Union 47, parental-student choice was the rule, either for secondary schools or, in Arrowsic, for all students.

Frances Tolan chaired the Arrowsic School Board at the time, and admits to mixed feelings about the issue. "My children went to the Georgetown school, and they loved being there," she said. But the town's policy of "every family choosing different schools has drawbacks,"

"They were resisting until we showed them that the Union 47 kids were scoring 20 points higher on the MEA. Then they decided we could try it."

NANCY HARRIMAN
curriculum coordinator,
on a new math program

“I think our constituents were looking to the school board for advice and leadership, and we considered that part of the job.”

FRANCES TOLAN
RSU 1 board member

A view of the new Woolwich Central School, which will replace an existing K-8 school. RSU 1 has one high school, two middle schools, and four elementary schools.



she said. “It’s harder to create a sense of community in town. There were families in town with children the same age, and we didn’t know them.”

While most high school students in Union 47 chose Morse High School, and many attended the Bath Middle School, families also sent children to Lincoln Academy in Damariscotta, and to public and private schools in Edgecomb, Wiscasset, Brunswick, Topsham and Lewiston.

“If we voted to join,” Tolan said, “we were going to end a long-standing tradition.” She said that the offer of grandfathered rights for existing tuition students, and their siblings, may have helped some families, but not everyone. “We knew what we’d be giving up, but not necessarily what we were getting in return.” In the end, she said it was the promise of school board representation that turned the tide. “Morse is our high school now. That’s a major change for the better.”

The three-member Arrowsic board debated the consolidation issue long and hard, and finally emerged with a unanimous recommendation in favor, which the voters endorsed. In Georgetown, the only town eligible to join RSU 1 that voted not to do so, the school board did not take a position on consolidation.

“I think our constituents were looking to the school board for advice and leadership, and we considered that part of the job,” Tolan said.

The advent of district-wide school choice, which is unusual if not unique in Maine, is one aspect of the merger school officials are still keeping an eye on. So far, relatively few K-8 students are crossing town boundaries other than those using the grandfathered provisions.

The late Bill Reed, the long-time bus contractor for Bath and Union 47, who was interviewed earlier this spring, said that he had to add several vans to the fleet to accommodate families with students going in different directions. The idea is to keep the buses on schedule as much as possible – the longest rides, from Phippsburg to Bath, rarely exceed 45 minutes – while not adding too many vehicles to the run.

Reed, who was in the business for 40 years, did his scheduling on note cards and never used computer software, even for planning. “That would be too complicated,” he said. He said he did have some concerns about where choice could lead in the future, “if people are choosing a school based on where day care is afterward.”

Shuttleworth said he’s convinced in-district choice was the right decision. The additional cost of all new school assignments has been about \$5,000 a year so far. “In a \$23 million budget, that’s a small price to pay,” he said.

Charles Durfee, who was not involved in the transition team process, said he’s skeptical about the value of school choice over the traditional district or town assignments. He said when the new state-funded Woolwich K-8 school opens in 2010, it could attract more students from other towns, including Bath, as new schools have done in other communities around the state. A choice policy “can create some waves that slosh in one direction, and then the other.” He said “it raises a little concern about the impacts, and we’re still watching how it works.”

Perhaps surprisingly, the financial arrangements of the new district have attracted relatively little comment and

even less controversy. The two school budgets have passed overwhelmingly, and the municipal shares of the budget – based on a unique formula equally counting population, student enrollment, and property valuation – have closely tracked predictions.

Shuttleworth said that his biggest concern about the budget has been the steadily decreasing proportion of state aid, which for these five communities has dropped from nearly 50% to about 35% during his five years as superintendent. First there was the impact of rapidly rising valuations along the coast, and lately the sharp cutbacks in state subsidy.

The bill authorizing the new district originally contained a provision guaranteeing a constant state subsidy for three years; it was later deleted. Shuttleworth still believes the state should offer such incentives to consolidating districts. “There’s a lot of work, and a lot of expense, in doing this. If the state really wants more districts to consolidate, it ought to support the work they’re doing,” he said.

Under terms of LD 910, the district was to pursue unified contracts with unionized employees as soon as both parties agreed to, and is now engaged in negotiations. While not commenting on any current collective bargaining issues, Shuttleworth made it clear he does not agree with an argument frequently made by critics of consolidation that, in a new district, salaries and benefits would automatically be set at the highest level of any existing contract. Not only does the law not require this, but Shuttleworth said it would not be good local policy, either.

“We had a large number of contracts with different provisions in every one. There are different benefit packages, different starting salaries, different provisions for seniority,” he said. He added that the results of new contracts need to be affordable for taxpayers, and that responsibility exists in a newly consolidated district just as it does in existing ones. “It would be irresponsible for us to set contract terms in advance of the negotiations. This is part of what superintendents have to do, and we can’t avoid that responsibility.”

The need for compromise, he said, is no different for employees than it is for the public’s representatives on the school board: “No one gets everything they want.”

Local Concerns

Standardization has its limits, even in a regional school district. While equal opportunity, consistent programming, and adequate facilities must be provided, local needs and desires must also be reflected.

One continuing debate within RSU 1 is which schools sixth graders should attend. The Bath Middle School has long housed grades 6 through 8, while Woolwich serves grades K-8. In the other two towns with elementary schools, Phippsburg and West Bath, most students attended Bath Middle School but only after completing sixth grade.

As the new district was being formed, the administration recommended that sixth grade classes not be offered in the two outlying towns, in part due to low projected enrollment. Under the school choice policy, parents and students are free to choose which school they attend, but the district is not obligated to offer particular grades at each school.

Charles Durfee said that while Woolwich has 35 sixth graders, classes in both Phippsburg and West Bath were much smaller, leading to concerns about these schools’ ability to offer adequate programs and social opportunities.

Phippsburg sixth graders attended Bath and Woolwich middle schools for the current school year, but a community survey there indicated interest in retaining a sixth grade class for the 2009-10 school year. In West Bath, parents reached the opposite conclusion, and the move of the sixth graders to Bath or Woolwich will continue.

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WILLIAM SHUTTLEWORTH
RSU 1 superintendent



Members of the Morse High School outing club gather for a kayaking excursion on the Kennebec River.

“If you push an agenda too hard at the beginning, you won’t get the cooperation you’ll need later. In the end, the kids will decide this on their own.”

**WILLIAM SHUTTLEWORTH
on the location of 6th grade
classes**

Superintendent Shuttleworth recommended that the Phippsburg sixth grade be discontinued because of the small number of students involved, but after debating the issue, the RSU 1 board decided to continue offering sixth grade there this fall, although not committing to hiring another teacher.

“It’s the kind of accommodation you have to make as people get used to working with each other,” Shuttleworth said later. “If you push an agenda too hard at the beginning, you won’t get the cooperation you’ll need later. In the end, the kids will decide this on their own, which school they want to go to.”

Based on preliminary figures, it appears that seven Phippsburg sixth graders will remain there this fall.

A more protracted debate has gone on concerning Arrowsic students who had traditionally attended Georgetown Elementary School, and who continue to have grandfathered rights to do so under the district’s school choice policies.

In Georgetown, one concern in the debate about joining RSU 1 was that a regional board might eventually vote to close its K-6 school. State law now allows towns to retain such schools if they bear the additional expenses. Georgetown’s enrollment has fallen from 100 students five years ago to just 62 this year, including 13 students from Arrowsic. The smallest town in the area, Arrowsic has not had a school of its own for many years.

Statewide, the average tuition cost is \$7,241 per elementary school student. In RSU 1, the per pupil cost is \$8,665. Georgetown reports its costs at \$15,254, nearly twice as much. Most Georgetown students, meanwhile, attend schools in Bath after the sixth grade.

After a number of offers and counter-offers about tuition for the Arrowsic students attending Georgetown, the two boards settled on \$11,695 per student, which represents a 35% premium above RSU 1’s per student costs.

Shuttleworth said that the budget item is relatively small for RSU 1 and, like transportation costs related to school choice, it should be seen in context of the transition to a new district. For next year, it’s projected that nine Arrowsic students will be attending school in Georgetown.

Five Year Plan

William Shuttleworth said he intends to use the five years he’s been granted under his initial contract to position RSU 1 for educational and, eventually, enrollment growth.

The expansion of offerings at Morse High School, the reformulation of the vocational programs, and the district-wide emphasis on literacy are intended to reduce the dropout rate, increase the proportion of students going on to college, and respond to community aspirations for kids.

Even as the district was being formed, he was talking about the need for a new Morse High School to replace buildings that date from the 1930s. The existing downtown campus is not suitable for a new school, but the district owns more than 30 acres on the Bath Middle School campus, just north of town, that could be available.

Shuttleworth says he’s frustrated by the state’s current construction program shortfall. Schools now being built, including the new Woolwich K-8 school built on the same site, date from the 2001-02 “protected list” chosen during the King administration. While the

Legislature expanded the EPS debt ceiling limit to accommodate double the usual number of projects, it has still been seven years since the last round of funding.

“I called the other day and asked about submitting a plan for a new high school,” he said, “and they told me not to, that they weren’t accepting any applications.” Eventually, the state will need to reaffirm its traditional process of offering state aid for school construction if it wants the new regional districts to perform at a high level, he said.

Assessments

It is difficult to measure public satisfaction with new public agencies, but the Lower Kennebec Regional School District seems to have passed most of the tests. Its board meetings have been largely harmonious, the organizational startup was smooth, and financial affairs have been businesslike. Cities like Bath are traditionally the most reluctant to hand over control of school departments to regional boards, since they previously functioned as one agency among several in the city administration. But there have apparently been no second thoughts among city councilors, some of whom were involved with the transition process.

William Shuttleworth makes it clear that he pursued the new district’s superintendency primarily because of the educational opportunities it could create, not because of financial savings that would result. “I’m a good money man, but that’s not why I do this job,” he said.

His recent newsletter for district residents covers everything from advocacy for a longer school day and year, through the use of technology and professional development, to the need for comparing Maine schools to the best that exist in other countries.

He writes, “In a recent speech, President Obama stated that America’s schools seem to be competing for a race to the bottom, all tragic, unnecessary, [and] stirring a moral obligation and urgency to make formative, lasting, but hard changes in how we educate all of our children.”

And he concludes, “I am not trying to create a stir when I say that public school teachers and administrators are handsomely paid public employees, perhaps the highest compensated public employees. I also don’t think we need a lot more money. We have more than adequate resources. We use these wisely.”

Charles Durfee said he approached his job as the first RSU 1 board chair without many preconceptions. He said he “expected a lot more parochial interests” than there were, even though it’s necessary “to deal with individuals who want to push their own interests” – a process he sees as healthy. “That hasn’t roadblocked the progress we’ve made.”

His advice to other consolidating districts is brief. A new district should have a strong geographical focus and a developing sense of community, and it helps to believe “that it’s better and easier to do work as a group.”

Aside from those observations, “Be ready for compromises, because you’ll need buckets of them,” he said. “We’re still struggling with some of the issues we took on at the start.” If communities and boards want the new arrangement to work, “Rather than putting yourself at the service of a single goal, be prepared to talk, and to reconsider some of your cherished beliefs.”

“Be ready for compromises, because you’ll need buckets of them, Be prepared to talk, and to reconsider some of your cherished beliefs.

CHARLES DURFEE

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