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UPDATE...

April 2017

LePage's cuts to superintendents would leave Maine schools without needed leadership

The following opinion piece was printed in the Bangor Daily News on May 1, 2017.

By Talya Edlund, Special to the BDN

I often tell my students, “you get what you give.” In these cases, I most likely am giving them a pep talk to ramp up their levels of pride, effort or engagement around learning. But after reading Gov. Paul LePage’s recent comments on educational spending, I would like to pivot my take on this adage. When investing in education, you also get what you give.

Recently, the governor suggested a drastic reduction in the number of school superintendents in Maine. He aims [to reduce the number of superintendents](#) from 147 to — as he put it — “about a dozen.” These cuts would fall under [his proposed education budget](#), which is \$20 million less than what was spent in the last fiscal cycle.

There is no other state with comparable populations and demographics that has this low a number of superintendents.

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Committee votes against removing charter cap

A majority of the Education Committee voted against a bill that would lift the cap on the number of charter schools that can be approved by the Maine Charter School Commission, with members saying not enough is being done to hold the schools accountable for student performance.

Education Committee House Chairman Rep. Tori Kornfield, D-Bangor, led the discussion, saying she was opposed to the bill because she was disappointed in the commission’s lack of action when two charter schools were some of the worst performing on state assessments.

“I would feel better about this idea, if I saw the charter commission not renewing,” the schools’ contracts, she said.

L.D. 1158, An Act To Remove the Limit on the Number of
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Commissioner pushes regional centers plan

Education Commissioner Robert Hasson came to MSBA’s Board of Directors meeting on April 29 to talk about the governor’s plan to create service center regions that school districts could voluntarily join to share services – a proposal Gov. LePage is promoting as part of his push to have fewer superintendents in the state.

Hasson, accompanied by the governor’s education policy advisor, Aaron Chadbourne, tried to allay fears that this was the start of another move toward school consolidation.

“We’re trying not to make the same mistake,” he said, referring to former Gov. John Baldacci’s mandated consolidation that led to district mergers, but was met with huge resistance and cost districts time and money.

“It really isn’t consolidation,” Hasson said. “It’s totally voluntary.”

Still Hasson got pushback from board members when he suggested the service center regions could lead to fewer superintendents – a fear made all the more real by the fact the governor’s budget eliminates any funding for system administration, which includes superintendents, the business office and all central office functions and staff.

“I’m trying to provoke thinking,” he said. “Two hundred and forty districts for 177,000 students is not sustainable.” Hasson, a longtime superintendent in MSAD 51, was referring to an estimated number of units in the state if you count all the individual members of Alternative Organizational Structures (AOSs) and Unions.

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LePage's cuts to superintendents

It seems that his proposal is an arbitrary and unrealistic means of reducing costs. It would surely lead to instability and lack of direction in Maine's education system.

Strong leadership is essential for improving outcomes for schools and students. A superintendent oversees everything in a district, including curriculum, staffing, parent and community concerns, transportation, technology and diminishing budgets — to name the most obvious. I have taught under six different superintendents. I have sat on superintendent interview panels, and I have attended numerous leadership conferences targeting professional development for local and state education chiefs.

Through these experiences, I have found that most school leaders loosely fall into three categories: those who manage, those who have vision, and those who can skillfully do both. When a superintendent has the latter, school cultures improve and staff morale is bolstered, and as a result the needle moves for students.

LePage has repeatedly asserted that we spend too much on education. But in the 13 years I have taught in Maine, I have watched as superintendents grappled with yearly cuts to programs and staff at the expense of student needs. Too many of our schools are short of social workers, early childhood programs and technology. Schools across the state are in need of structural improvements and updated facilities. Most tragically, the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch continues to increase — [currently 45.6 percent](#) — and schools continue to provide a wide net of support for them. These items are costly, yet it is unconscionable to prioritize saving money over meeting the needs of our children. Certainly eliminating the very leaders who have the scope and skills to address these needs is not the path to take.

As the 2016 Maine Teacher of the Year, I was a member of LePage's [Blue Ribbon Commission to Reform Public Education Funding and Improve Student Performance](#). The commission included a cross section of community leaders, superintendents, higher education representatives, legislators and two teachers. The work of the commission included evaluating the funding formula for Maine's schools and raising achievement — particularly for low-performing students.

As a practicing classroom teacher, it was a challenge to get to these meetings. I did not want to leave my students, and it was difficult to find a substitute. I had to leave my husband in charge of my children. I paid for the tolls, the gas and the necessary Starbucks venti black coffee out of pocket. I did so because it felt important to be a voice in a forum that could potentially affect students from Cape Elizabeth to Calais. The commission's conversations were thoughtful and informative, and I believed everyone at the table had the best intentions for Maine. We heard presentations on Maine's funding formula (fair); on Maine's economy (concerning); on educational initiatives aimed at raising achievement and graduation rates (hopeful); and on rising numbers of students living in poverty (troubling).

The commission presented the governor with a list of specific recommendations. These recommendations are public record, and they included directions to incentivize the regionalization of programs and districts where it makes sense. But nowhere in

the recommendations did we suggest or discuss reducing the number of superintendents to 12. I question why so many of us spent our time, money, and energy preparing for and participating in meetings that were ultimately ignored. Decisions in education are about children, and, thus, they are too complex and high stakes to be treated in this manner.

In a state whose population is shrinking, we have a great opportunity to shift this decline by revitalizing our schools and reminding families that Maine is a great place to raise kids. Rather than making more sweeping cuts in education, we would do better to invest in building Maine's capacity for visionary leaders that will ensure that our schools continue on a steep trajectory of continuous improvement. As I said before, you get what you give.

Talya Edlund is a fifth-grade teacher at Cape Elizabeth Middle School and the 2016 Maine Teacher of the Year.

Committee votes against

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Public Charter Schools That May Be Approved, proposes lifting the cap of 10 schools in the first 10 years following the passage of the state's charter school law in 2011. Nine have been approved.

Of those nine, two did poorly on statewide assessments, with Cornville Elementary in the bottom 10 in math and English and Harpswell Coastal Academy in the bottom 10 for math. The commission not only renewed Cornville's charter, but the day before the poor test scores were released voted to allow the elementary school to start a high school program.

Rep. Phyllis Ginzler, R-Bridgton, made the point there are low performing traditional public schools as well.

"Your concern about performance is a good one, but I'd like it to extend to public schools as well. We remediate them. The one thing about charters is we can pull the charter," she said.

Sen. Rebecca Millett, D-Cumberland, countered, saying the charter laws calls on those schools approved by the commission to be models.

The law reads, in part:

"Charter schools may be established as public schools pursuant to this chapter to improve pupil learning by creating more high-quality schools with high standards for pupil performance; to close achievement gaps between high-performing and low-performing groups of public school students; to increase high-quality educational opportunities within the public education system."

"This was a grand experiment," said Rep. David McCrea, D-Fort Fairfield, one on which the state is now spending more than \$23 million. He reiterated a need echoed by others on the committee that there should be an objective study on charter school performance.

"There always needs to be a lab report following the experiment," he said.

At a meeting of the Maine Charter Commission on May 2, Commissioner John Bird said he is looking to get objective research on charter school performance, referring to the type of work done by David Silvernail at the University of Southern Maine's Research Center.

"We need to have a handle on the performance data," Bird said.

School Leadership

Part 2: Bringing the Standards to Life Reflections and conversations for school board members and administrative teams

Part 1 of this article was published in the March 2017 issue of the Update

#3 Foster a culture that enables excellence and innovation.

High Quality Staff – Empowers the superintendent in hiring and developing the best employees available to meet the district’s goals.

- How do the current policies and procedures support the attraction and retention of quality employees?
- What strategies are currently utilized to attract and retain quality employees?
- What challenges is the district facing in attracting and retaining quality employees?
- What actions is the district currently taking to address the challenges?
- What additional actions are needed to ensure a quality workforce?

Shared Leadership – Supports structures that develop instructional leadership and collaboration.

- What structures are currently in place to support instructional leadership and collaboration?
- How is the effectiveness of those structures measured?
- What benefits are being realized because of shared leadership around instruction?
- What additional opportunities for shared leadership might be considered?

Staff Learning – Supports research-based staff professional development, aligned with district goals.

- How is the professional development plan currently developed, implemented and evaluated?
- How does the district ensure that the plan is research-based?
- How does the district work to align the plan with district goals?
- Which data is gathered and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the plan?

Environment – Fosters a safe and secure environment for all students, staff, and visitors.

- What strategies are currently used to provide a safe and secure learning environment?
- What challenges does the district face in providing a safe and secure learning environment?
- What additional steps might be considered to provide a safe and secure environment for students, staff, and visitors?

#4 Lead through sound policy, ensuring transparent, ethical, legal operations.

Policy Leadership – Develops sound, written policy to clarify the board’s intent for district direction.

- What processes are currently in place for the development and revision of district policy?
- What supports are used to assess and review district policies?
- What additional actions might be considered to more fully engage the board in the work of policy development and review?
- To what extent does the board use policies in its decision-making?

Legal – Ensures that board and district actions follow state and federal laws, appropriately addressing legal issues when they arise.

- What is the current level of understanding of state and federal law that impacts board and district actions?
- What supports are currently in place to support compliance with state and federal laws?
- What processes are in place to address legal issues that may arise?
- What additional steps might be taken to ensure understanding of and compliance with state and federal laws?

Ethics – Models ethical and legal behaviors that enable the board to stay focused on district goals.

- To what extent does the board model ethical behaviors which enable it to stay focused on district goals?
- What processes are in place to hold board members accountable to ethical and legal behavior?

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Bringing the Standards to Life

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- To what extent does the board model ethical behaviors which enable it to stay focused on district goals?
- What processes are in place to hold board members accountable to ethical and legal behavior?

Transparency – Establishes policies and ensure processes that are open and accountable.

- What steps are currently being taken to establish and support transparency?
- What additional steps might be considered to ensure that processes are open and accountable?
- How would you rate the current level of district transparency?
- What factors contribute to your rating?

#5 Sustain and enhance district resources through planning and fiduciary oversight.

Financial Health – Monitors and evaluates the financial health of the district, ensuring accountability and transparency in board decision making.

- What policies, processes, and procedures are currently in place to monitor and evaluate the financial health of the district?
- What is the involvement of the Board in monitoring and evaluating the financial health of the district?

Financial Forecasting – Ensures strong financial planning for the district.

- What policies, processes and procedures are currently in place to ensure strong financial planning for the district?
- What is the involvement of the board in financial planning of the district?
- What additional supports might be considered to educate and engage the board in the financial planning of the district?

Budgeting – Ensures the district budget aligns with district goals and multi-year plans.

- In what ways is the district budget aligned with the district goals?
- What is the current level of involvement of the board in ensuring that the district budget aligns with the district goals and multi-year plans?
- What additional steps might be taken to encourage engagement in conversation relative to budget alignment with district goals and multi-year plans?

Part 3 of this article will be published in the May 2017 issue of the Update.

-American School Board Journal, 4/2017, by Denise Schares

MSBA sponsored bills moving forward

Three of four bills sponsored as a result of resolutions passed by the Maine School Boards Association Delegate Assembly have received favorable votes in the Education Committee and are headed to the full Legislature for a vote. The fourth had its public hearing on Monday.

Special Education Study

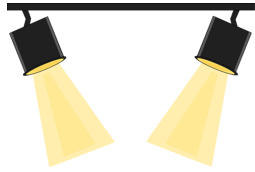
LD 642, Resolve, to Establish the Task Force To Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches to Services, received a unanimous vote in favor from the Education Committee. It creates a task force to identify special education cost drivers and innovative approaches to services. The task force will produce a report by December of this year and can recommend legislation for consideration in 2018.

Student Transfers

LD 1015, An Act To Improve the Student Transfer Process, creates a task force to define “student’s best interest”, which superintendents must consider when asked to approve a transfer to a school outside of the home district. The task force also would look at which transfer denials at the local level were overturned on appeal by the state and why. The goal is to define a process that will make the system fair and more predictable. The bill received a strong 10-2 vote from the Education Committee.

Normal Teacher Retirement Rate Setting

LD 1045, An Act to Create More Transparency in the Setting of Normal Teacher Retirement Costs, requires the Maine Public Employees Retirement System to present its methodology and actuarial data to a joint meeting of the Education and Appropriation’s Committees and ultimately alert school districts 11 months in advance of the rate hike. Up until this time, rate hikes were simply included in the biennial budget, giving districts little time to prepare. The bill also requires a study that shows the impact of normal retirement rate hikes on the cost of education and General Purpose Aid going out to schools. The bill received a unanimous vote in the Appropriations Committee.



Employee Spotlight

Meet Charlotte Bates



Charlotte Bates, MSMA's Director of Policy and Research Services, has worked at MSMA since 2000 and is the one school board members and superintendents call when they have questions about policy, parliamentary procedure and other school related issues.

Her responsibilities include developing sample policies; policy manual review and revision services; research and analysis of legislation and rulemaking for impact on school

board policy; and, editing MSMA's Labor Relations, School Law and Policy newsletters.

She also has served as president of the American Association of State Policy Services (AASPS).

Charlotte is originally from Massachusetts. She earned her bachelor's degree from Bates College, her master's in Child Behavior and Development from the University of Iowa, and her JD from the University of Maine School of Law.

Prior to joining MSMA, she investigated suspected child abuse and neglect for the Missouri Division of Family Services; taught in the early childhood program in the Ferguson-Florissant (MO) School District; and practiced law in the private sector.

Having served on the Scarborough Board of Education as Vice Chair, Chair of the Policy Committee, and member of the Negotiations Committee, she is well acquainted with board responsibilities and the art of "boardsmanship."

She says the best parts of her job are the relationships with superintendents and school board members and the challenge of responding to the interesting and, occasionally, "first time ever" questions that MSMA is asked.

When not at work, she enjoys travel, day hiking, gardening and watching wildlife from home on the Scarborough Marsh.

She and her husband have two married adult children, two grandchildren, and two "grand-dogs."

Commissioner pushes regional centers

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AOSs and Unions are overseen by a single superintendent. There are 131 superintendents today, including 29 part-time positions.

Chadbourne also responded to the pushback from board members, who defended the role of their superintendents as essential, saying with the state required to pay 55 percent of the cost of education, as affirmed by the passage of Question 2, things were going to change.

"With the whole march toward 55 percent," he said districts would have to reconsider "complete local control". "You're inviting the state to pay the majority of the costs, but saying the state can't get involved?"

The governor's regionalization plan, which ultimately needs legislative approval, would create what are being called Maine School Management Centers.

Maine School Management Centers (no LD number yet)

Under the draft proposal, which has not come out in bill form as of this writing, up to 12 service centers could be created. The proposal calls for:

- DOE Commissioner to determine the geography of the regions i.e. draw the lines
- Members join by inter-local agreements
- All school districts and school boards remain in place and can be members. Associate members would include CTE Regions, Charter Schools, Magnet Schools, UT Schools
- Once districts are in they can only get out with permission from commissioner
- Centers employ executive directors
- State pays 55 percent of director salary and pays for student data system
- Centers have authority to borrow and expend funds and to bond
- \$5.5 million of targeted GPA in each year of the biennial budget would fund centers through grants
- Services fall in four categories: **Instructional Services**, like Special Education, Gifted and Talented, summer school; **Education Support Service**: technology, co-curricular programs and professional development; **Central Office Services** superintendent, business office and food service; **Facilities and Transportation** including shared bus routing and maintenance, energy management and facilities maintenance.



If you have questions about any articles in this newsletter or suggestions for improving this publication, let us know.

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