

# Maine Issue Brief

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## How Consolidation Threatens School Choice The Bath/Union 47 School Merger Proposal and the Future of School Choice in Maine

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What the people of Arrowsic, Georgetown, Phippsburg, West Bath, and Woolwich are being encouraged to do would shock supporters of school choice across the nation, who are working diligently to win the very school choice rights that people of these communities are being told they must give up.

Residents of these five towns currently, and for many years, have had the opportunity to send their children to schools of their own choosing, public or private, under Maine's Town Tuitioning program. Georgetown, Phippsburg, and West Bath operate K-6 schools and Woolwich operates a K-8 school. Students in these towns, once old enough to leave the public school systems, are able to attend a school of their choice for the remainder of their K-12 education, paid for by the towns. Arrowsic, the fifth of the five towns, operates no school at all, and therefore tuitions all its students.

While many students tuitioned in this way attend nearby public middle and high schools, an estimated 100 to 150 students from these five towns "attend schools outside the region" each year, meaning private schools of their choice, including schools out of state. It is this kind of freedom that supporters of school choice across the nation want enacted in their own communities.

The five towns in question, however, are being asked to give up that choice as part of a proposal to merge School Union 47, of which all five towns are members, with the neighboring Bath school system. According to the "governance plan" being advanced by consolidation supporters, "all students will attend regional public schools, with no tuition choice to schools, private or public, outside the region." Students already taking advantage of the tuitioning program and any siblings of theirs will be "grandfathered" and allowed to complete their K-12 educations under the tuitioning program, but after that, Union 47's current school choice option under the Maine Town Tuitioning program will be abolished.[1]

Why is this being done? Like arguments in favor of school consolidation everywhere, the case being made in support of this proposal is almost entirely financial. While supporters of the merger plan cite the increased efficiencies to be had by consolidating the districts, which are no doubt there, it is the tuitioning program that is the real target. According to the proposal, "Major savings ...relate to the elimination of tuition payments by communities within the region...[students currently tuitioned] can and should be added with little financial impact and absorbed into the planned operation structure." The proposal suggests that eliminating school choice could save \$1.3 million a year.[2]

A closer look at the numbers suggests otherwise. As Table 1 indicates, it does not appear to be tuitioning that is driving costs. On a per-student basis, Arrowsic, which tuitions all its students, has the lowest per-pupil costs of any of the six towns. Georgetown's tiny 86-student school and its high administrative spending drive up its per-pupil costs, but the other Union 47 towns are all spending far less per student than Bath, which, because it runs its own K-12 system, tuitions none of its students.

In fact, even if the proposed consolidation savings of almost \$5 million are accurate, which is questionable, the new district will still be spending over \$10,000 per pupil, more than three out of five of the Union 47 schools systems are spending now. There's more. Not only is the totally-tuitioning Arrowsic spending less than the surrounding towns that operate schools, it is getting more education for each dollar it does spend.

| School Administrative Unit         | Expenditures        | Number of Pupils (a) | Per-Pupil Spending |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Arrowsic                           | \$579,189           | 71                   | \$8,215            |
| Georgetown                         | \$1,924,574         | 132                  | \$14,636           |
| Phippsburg                         | \$3,232,225         | 300                  | \$10,792           |
| West Bath                          | \$2,752,153         | 299                  | \$9,205            |
| Woolwich                           | \$4,494,165         | 467                  | \$9,623            |
| Bath                               | \$17,141,300        | 1,250                | \$13,719           |
| Current Total                      | <b>\$30,123,606</b> | <b>2,517</b>         | <b>\$11,968</b>    |
| Proposed Total after Consolidation | <b>\$25,375,162</b> | <b>2,517</b>         | <b>\$10,082</b>    |

(a) Data for 2005/2006 school year.  
Source: See sources [1] and [3].

Table 2  
Categories of School Spending  
2005/2006 School Year

| School Administrative Unit | Instructional Spending | District and School Administration | Other spending |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| Arrowsic                   | 93.9%                  | 2.7%                               | 4.2%           |
| Georgetown                 | 71.3%                  | 10.8%                              | 17.8%          |
| Phippsburg                 | 76.7%                  | 7.2%                               | 16.0%          |
| West Bath                  | 79.5%                  | 7.9%                               | 12.6%          |
| Woolwich                   | 74.5%                  | 8.0%                               | 13.3%          |
| Bath                       | 55.3%                  | 10.2%                              | 34.3%          |
| Source: See source [4]     |                        |                                    |                |

As Table 2 indicates, 94 percent of each education dollar spent by Arrowsic goes to student instruction. In Bath, which has no tuitioning, only 55 percent goes to instruction, 10 percent below the state average of 65 percent and well below that of any of the Union 47 towns.

Arrowsic's tuition dollars, are, of course, ultimately spent on administration and other services provided by the schools in which its students enroll, but at least parents and students there have a choice of schools to attend, and can choose one that focuses more of its education dollars on instruction than Bath.

So if tuitioning is clearly more cost-effective, why is it being targeted? It has more to do with power than with money.

The Bath/Union 47 Consolidation Committee's report claims that "both teachers and facilities should be more efficiently employed by requiring all regional students to attend regional schools." In other words, students that are currently given a

choice are not choosing the area's public schools, resulting in underutilized educational resources there. This problem will be solved, it is proposed, not by improving the educational product available in the public schools and winning back students who have other choices, but by compelling students to attend public schools whether they want to or not.

But if the proposed savings are correct, won't taxes at least go down? Apparently not. According to the consolidation committee, "it is conceivable that all or most of all the savings generated by regionalization will be rolled back to address areas of demanding improvement." In other words, they intend to strip families of their choice options, force those students into public schools, then take the tuition money once sent to the private and other public schools those children attended and spend it on the very public schools those families chose not to attend in the first place. Taxpayers will see no savings and families will lose school choice. In the end, it is the public school bureaucracy that gains from this proposal, and they alone.

What is going on in the Bath area is instructive to supporters of school choice who wonder what will come of Maine's Town Tuitioning program in this era of school consolidation. Clearly, opponents of choice will avoid simply saying that choice is a bad thing, for Maine has too long a history of its success. They will instead couch the end of school choice in economic terms. They will speak of "gaining efficiencies," and of "focusing scarce resources." They will use the current climate of consolidation to say that there is no other option.

Supporters of school choice, therefore, should keep careful watch on the Bath/Union 47 proposal. What happens there will reveal a great deal about the ways in which current school consolidation efforts threaten the future of school choice in Maine.

#### Sources:

- [1] Bath/Union 47 consolidation plan details: *Bath and Union 47 Regional Education Task Force Report*, November, 2006.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] Bath/Union 47 pupil counts: <http://www.maine.gov/education/data/ppcosts/2006/ppc06.htm>. Most recent data available.
- [4] Instructional and Administrative spending percents: <http://www.maine.gov/education/data/indicators/indicators.html>.

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