

Questions Related to School Consolidation

1. What is consolidation?

Consolidation is the merging of hundreds of school systems in Maine to no more than 80, as required by state law.

2. Why did the Governor and Legislature “push” for consolidation?

Maine is faced with a fiscal crisis. Funding for education is one of the two biggest components of the state budget, the other being the Department of Health and Human Services. Revenues are not keeping pace with funding needs, and the student population has declined dramatically. The state is looking to lower the cost of education and has decided to do so by cutting educational costs through consolidating school systems.

3. Why are we going through this process?

The consolidation law requires a discussion by all school systems in the state. The Governor’s reason for introducing the law is that there has been a dramatic decrease in the student population over the past 20 years and the ability of the State to financially support education. His recommendation is to reduce the number of school units from 250 to 80.

4. Do towns/cities need to do anything?

Yes. The Legislature saw towns and cities as invaluable leaders in the formation process. Currently every town (Belgrade, China, Oakland, Rome and Sidney) is represented on the Regional Planning Committee, along with school board members, community members, teachers, and district administrators. The job of the Regional Planning Committee is to analyze whether such a school system makes sense and to make recommendations to each school board/committee.

5. What happens if people choose not to consolidate?

Communities who are not exempt from the requirements of the consolidation law face stiff penalties. They face a 50% reduction in administrative support from the state. They face less favorable treatment by the state on construction applications. They will also face loss of support from the state relating to general-purpose aid to education (55% lowered to 53.86%).

However, MSAD #47 is exempt from the law now because we are over the 2,500 pupil population cut off set by law. However, it is important to recognize that our student population is dropping. Therefore, we chose to investigate consolidation now, before schools that would make good partners choose to consolidate with other schools. This could help to avoid potentially significant losses in state funding in the future.

6. What is the timeline for consolidating?

- August 31, 2007 - Letters of Intent to Commissioner Due
- December 1, 2007 - Progress Reports Due to Maine Department of Education
- June 3, 2008 - The 1st opportunity to vote is projected by the RPC.
- November 4, 2008 - The voters choose to form a Regional School Unit.
- Winter 2009 - The newly formed RSU elects a new RSU School Board.

Winter 2009 - The newly elected RSU Board works with the current MSAD #47 School Board and China School Committee to transition fully by July 2009.

July 2009 - New RSU replaces MSAD #47 and China School Department.

7. What's happening locally?

As a result of legislation signed into law by Governor Baldacci, school consolidation conversations are occurring all over Maine. In our area, MSAD #47, which includes the towns of Belgrade, Oakland, Rome and Sidney and the Town of China have created a Regional Planning Committee (RPC) and entered into discussions about becoming one Regional School Unit (RSU). This Regional Planning Committee was formed to analyze whether such a district makes sense and to make recommendations to each school committee. No decision may be made to consolidate without the vote of the people. The RPC determined that MSAD #47 and China should form a new school district together.

8. Who are the people of the Regional Planning Committee and how were they selected?

Town governments and the school systems appointed the people on the Regional Planning Committee. Nearly thirty-six people are on our Regional Planning Committee. They are doing so voluntarily, having given up every Thursday night since September 2007.

Representing Belgrade are Melanie Jewell, Dennis Keschl, and Jack Sutton.

Representing China are Charley Clark, Elwood Ellis, Deanne Pizzo, and Frank Soares.

Representing Oakland are Steve Dyer, Ralph Farnham, Jr., Mike Gosselin, and Mike Tracy.

Representing Sidney are Doug Eugley and Jeff Frost.

Representing Rome are Larry Brown, Malcolm Charles, and Bob Moreau.

Superintendent Hugh Riordan of SU 52 and Superintendent Dr. James C. Morse, Sr. of Messalonskee, also serve of the Regional Planning Committee.

Staff Support on the Committee:

Central Office Staff

Linda Laughlin, Assistant Superintendent, MSAD 47

Nora Murray, Director of Curriculum and Assessment, School Union 52

Connie Packard, Business Manager, MSAD 47

Gary Smith, Business Manager, School Union 52

Teachers' Association Representative

Robin Colby, Teachers' Association President, MSAD 47

9. Will consolidation ensure better education and educational opportunities for our children?

When we started these consolidation efforts, we had two goals in mind. The first goal was to enhance educational opportunities for all students, and the second goal was to make our schools as financially efficient as possible.

Consolidation will not ensure a better education for our children in and of itself. However, the reason we entered the discussions with China and other school systems was we were required by law to do so, and we felt that other towns in our area were a good match for MSAD #47.

Each has been frugal with tax dollars and has been able to provide excellent programming for its children.

One possible way to continue to do so, in face of fewer and fewer students, is to combine our efforts just as the towns of Belgrade, Oakland, and Sidney did in 1965 when MSAD #47 was formed (Rome later joined in 2006).

10. Why is China a good match for MSAD #47?

China looks and feels just like member communities of MSAD #47, especially Belgrade and Sidney.

- China has 4,408 residents, Belgrade has 3,209 residents, and Sidney has 3,966 residents.
- China, like all MSAD #47 communities has significant lakefront property.
- China has experienced dramatic increases in property valuation, just like Belgrade, Oakland, Rome and Sidney.
- China's overall valuation, as determined by the State for 2007, was \$323,450,000, which places it between Sidney at \$311,800,000 and Oakland at \$376,950,000.
- China adds 801 students to MSAD #47's 2,563 student population, providing the new RSU with 3,364 students.

11. What will be the number of students in the new school system?

The number of students for the new RSU would be 3,364 – 2,563 from MSAD #47 and 801 from China.

12. Does consolidation make sense geographically? Won't there be transportation difficulties and increased costs?

Although China is not connected to MSAD #47 geographically, there will be no massive increase in transportation costs since most China students attend China's Erskine Academy. We will likely continue to see a small number of high school students attend Messalonskee.

13. What are the benefits of merging with China?

- The proposed RSU appears to conform to the intent of present state law.
- Larger student population of the proposed RSU hedges against forecast high school student declines for MSAD #47, which would otherwise result in decreased future state aid (based on student count) and increased taxation pressures in member towns.
- Savings are anticipated through shared consolidated administrative functions, purchasing, etc., with a goal of 3% of total operating costs annually within three years. Without consolidating, there will be no opportunity to share these costs, and MSAD #47 member towns will continue to fully fund them. There is the very real potential, based on student decline and rising property valuations, to have more of a burden placed on our towns financially, the result of which could be reducing or eliminating programs and activities.

- The Town of China has geographic and school size characteristics that are similar to those of MSAD #47 towns. China representatives portray their town as a willing partner, committed to a positive long-term relationship with MSAD #47.
- Large migration of students between schools is not anticipated because elementary grades will remain in local town schools, and much of China high school student population is expected to continue to attend Erskine Academy or Winslow High School as tuition students, at the proposed RSU's average high school cost per student.
- The current proposal allows for future consideration of changing the "local share" formula – from town valuation to some combination of valuation and student count.

14. What is the benefit of more students?

Consolidating a new school system with China will ultimately mean more students for the new RSU. More students increases state aid. There are two major components to state aid to education: the number of students and state valuation of a given community. School consolidation should have little impact on area elementary and middle/junior high schools, as all schools in MSAD #47 and China are full. Consolidation will lead to the sharing of services at the Central Office, such as central services with greater state support.

15. There seem to be a lot of reasons to support consolidation. What are those issues that may not support our consolidation with China?

Reasons to not support consolidation include maintaining the status quo in MSAD #47 and China's independence.

16. What will change as a result of the consolidation of MSAD #47 with China?

To the students consolidation will not result in changes that are obvious. To most parents nothing in consolidation will cause dramatic change. To the communities involved consolidation will be largely transparent. Since China is similar in size and composition to MSAD #47 schools, the changes should be minor. China will be part of a larger school system with a different superintendent, so governance and relationship to administration and school board will be the largest change.

17. How much savings will there be? After reading the newspaper articles about the difference in salaries and benefits, can there be any savings?

The analysis of potential savings is on going. Every component of both school systems will be analyzed and scrutinized by the new RSU school board when board members take office in the winter of 2009. The RPC has identified immediate savings in Central Office administration and special education administration.

18. Are there any outstanding issues with this consolidation?

- Ongoing success of the proposed RSU will be affected by the strength of support from the townspeople of all member communities. The goal for November 4th should be decisive up or down votes by all towns.
- Will consolidation of contracts for the proposed RSU produce pressures for salary increases driven solely by the consolidation, over and above normal MSAD #47 contract issues? If so, might RSU-specific increases negate or exceed anticipated savings for the RSU? Can this possibility be avoided by advance stipulation?

- Are state law and regulations with respect to school consolidation sufficiently settled to rely on the present ground rules for forming the RSU with China? Are RSU partnership(s) with Waterville and/or Winslow and Vassalboro firmly off the table?
- What happens if the consolidation plan isn't approved by the voters? For MSAD #47 that would be submitting a letter to the State to stand alone and/or pursuing savings through membership in an AOS or through interlocal agreements.

19. *How is the consolidation decision made?*

On November 4, 2008 the voters of China and Messalonskee will make the final decision at the ballot. No consolidation can take place without the support of the voters.

20. *I understand that the decision to consolidate has already been made. Is that true?*

No, however, the Governor has decided that there will be school consolidation in our state. Again, no final decision to consolidate will be made without the vote of the people. The Regional Planning Committee has met for over 14 months. Committee members have analyzed, assessed, negotiated and have made recommendations. Each school unit's school board has submitted a consolidation plan to the Department of Education, and the Commissioner has approved it, so now it must be voted on by the people.

21. *How do I stay informed about the consolidation efforts?*

Detailed minutes are kept on each school system's WEB pages. Every meeting and every sub-committee report and every recommendation is listed on the WEB. In addition, ALL meetings were held in public session the 1st and 3rd Thursdays of each month, and the public was welcome to attend.

<http://www.msad47.org>

<http://www.maine.gov/education/supportingschools/index.html>

22. *What are the consequences for not consolidating?*

Since local voter approval of any consolidation plan is required, the law does not authorize the Department of Education to compel existing school administrative units (SAUs) to join an RSU. Rather than making consolidation mandatory, the law imposes heavy financial penalties on those SAUs that do not comply. Although consolidation is up for public vote, there are financial consequences for not consolidating. The financial penalties listed below are as stated in the law.

- The minimum state allocation is reduced by 50%.
- The system administration component of the EPS total cost of education is reduced by 50%.
- Disqualification for any transition adjustments.
- A higher mil rate increase in local support by the local community to support education. The adjustment will be the mil rate expectation derived by applying the statewide total local share for 2006-07(46.14%) to fiscal years 2009-10 and after. This means less state funding and more local taxes for the non-complying school units.
- Receive less favorable consideration for approval and funding for school construction

23. Didn't we start out with a larger group? Waterville, Winslow, Vassalboro?

Yes. As we progressed through our 14 months of discussions, all communities except China withdrew from the consolidation effort.

24. Negatives for MSAD #47

- During the consolidation period there will be distractions apart from the normal functioning of the administrative and teaching staffs that are inherent with any major organizational change.
- Quantified savings appear minor compared to MSAD #47's total budget. Are added costs fully reflected to arrive at "net" savings?

25. Why didn't MSAD #47 stand on its own?

Although MSAD #47 could have stood on its own with over 2,500 students, we chose to enter into consolidation discussions with neighboring school systems because we will be losing students, especially at the high school level, over the next seven years. We have lost over 50 students already at Messalonskee High School. Within seven years we are projected to lose 180 more. Every student lost means less state subsidy. Less state subsidy means a cut in programs or an increase in local taxes or both.

26. Does school choice still exist for China?

High school choice still exists for China students. The consolidation law protected choice for those towns that already had it when the law was passed.

27. Do most China high school students attend Erskine Academy?

Yes. The vast majority of high school-age children from China attend Erskine. China high schoolers also attend Winslow, Waterville, Cony and other high schools. High schoolers will still be able to attend the high school of their choice.

28. What happens if this fails with the voters on November 4th?

China will face statutory penalties if the vote fails (see question #22). China will need to seek new partners with which to consolidate. MSAD #47 will face no penalties because we are over 2,500 students.

29. Why did the majority of the School Board members in MSAD #47 and the China School Committee and Board of Selectpersons support consolidation?

MSAD #47 will need the student count to get as much state aid as possible. These are trying economic times. The future holds fewer students for MSAD #47. More students represents a potential for increased state revenue, and more staff means a larger pool of dedicated professionals with whom to work.

China will have a dedicated high school. Currently China has no exclusive agreement with any high school because of choice. By being part of a larger RSU, Messalonskee High School becomes China's default high school. It is expected, however, that most high school age children from China will continue to attend Erskine.