

INSIDE MAINE



ESSENTIAL
OBSERVATIONS
Karl Trautman

School consolidation pushes forward as underdog

Do you ever root for the underdog? I sure do.

I suspect many others pull for them as well. I especially like to see the underdog win; it's satisfying to see the less powerful emerge victorious. When you think of the underdog and politics, what comes to mind? What group, or person, represents the underdog? Many people cannot agree. When it comes to school consolidation, like many other political issues, who the underdog is depends upon how the issue is framed.

According to the dictionary definition, an underdog is: "one that is expected to lose a contest, or struggle, as in sports and politics." It also means "one that is at a disadvantage." Based on those definitions, many people feel that small schools in rural areas are the true underdogs.

Their very existence is threatened with some school consolidation plans. This danger leads many people to want to give small communities plenty of time to change. Some believe that any plan that forces them to change too quickly should not be adopted.

This sentiment was expressed by Rep. Tom Saviello, an independent from Wilton, a member of the Rural Caucus. The Rural Caucus is a group that wants to protect local control. Interviewed on Maine Public Radio on May 21, Saviello was clear in his determination to stand up for a slower approach to consolidation: "Don't force people that aren't ready... because if you force people that aren't ready, they are not going to actively participate in the school district and we're dooming ourselves to failure and bitter feelings for a long time. If you give them a little more time..."

Forcing people to do something they are unready for is unfair. Government can do that if the majority approves. Moreover, you can only force something on an unwilling recipient if you have the power to do so. Apparently, Saviello believes the Rural Caucus, ultimately, doesn't have the power to stop a plan that it doesn't like.

In this sense, he is standing up for the underdog.

Scott Porter of the Maine Small Schools Association makes an even more fundamental appeal for small towns. He fears a final bill will ultimately force small schools to close through-

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out Maine. Interviewed on the same Maine Public Radio program, he stated, if that happened, "...it takes the fabric of the community away. Some of these towns, it's all they have, everything's closed, businesses have closed, everything is gone, the only thing left is the school."

It is easy to sympathize with Porter's fears. There are small towns in Maine, as in many other parts of the country, that are losing population. Sometimes the public school is the only focal point for the community.

These towns are classic underdogs.

However, others believe the Maine taxpayer is the genuine underdog in the school

consolidation debate. Taxpayers have to continually fund what is believed to be excessive administrative costs for education, all in the name of local control. They point to statistics on the Maine Department of Education Website which illustrates that change is necessary: Maine school districts average 734 students. This is in contrast to 3,200 nationally.

Peter Ventre, chairman of the Portland Regional Chamber's board of directors, expressed the frustration of many when he recently wrote that: "Today's existing K-12 administrative structure is stuck in the past, with far more administrative units than needed to perform its necessary functions. The overabundance of administrative districts produces remarkable inefficiency, imposing unnecessary costs and tax burdens on us all."

According to this perspective, change is the underdog. It wouldn't require much political courage for the Legislature to pass a watered-down bill, one that is purely optional for school districts and allows consolidation to occur later, rather than sooner.

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