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OUR VIEWS

**Time to get serious about
school reform**

Sweeping changes proposed for Maine's education system may not save the entire \$133 million projected by an educational consultant, but the recommendations deserve serious evaluation.

The analysis, delivered Friday to the Select Panel of Revisioning Education in Maine, suggests that the major changes the panel recommends to improve Maine schools' performance and efficiency won't come cheap.

Consultant David Silvernail of the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research and Evaluation, estimates it will cost Maine \$744 million to implement the baker's dozen of changes previously developed by the panel. Yet he thinks the overall savings that flow mainly from school district consolidations and targeted construction spending could fund a host of expanded educational programs while still saving a net \$133 million.

We are mindful of Silvernail's broad and important caveat: It's difficult to predict the real cost of the recommendations.

But the findings of the panel, released in a report last last year, leave little room for maintaining the status quo. "Maine's schools are not ready for the 21st century" is the somber opening line. Our school system is cumbersome, inefficient and "irrational."

Clearly, the most controversial recommendation involves a radical consolidation of school districts.

Maine has 689 public schools and 286 school districts, which averages out to 2.4 schools per district. The average Maine school had only 290 students, compared to the national average of 506. School districts average 734 students, one quarter the national average.

Why does this matter? The multiplicity of school district administrations requires that tax dollars are spent on unnecessary duplication, sucking up money that might otherwise be spent on students. By one estimate, our system wastes about \$270 million per year in lost economies of scale, or 20 percent of the total annual budget.

Obviously, Maine's large size and far-flung towns limit how much consolidation we could realistically achieve. But the panel's report - and now Silvernail's analysis - suggest that if current inefficiencies were rectified, money could be reoriented toward student learning.

That could include, for example, financing pre-kindergarten classes for 4-year-olds, lengthening the school year, decreasing class size, creating mutual fund accounts for every Maine-born child and increasing community-college tuition aid.

The panel's recommendations deserve an objective and thorough debate. We hope the 123rd Legislature is up to the task.