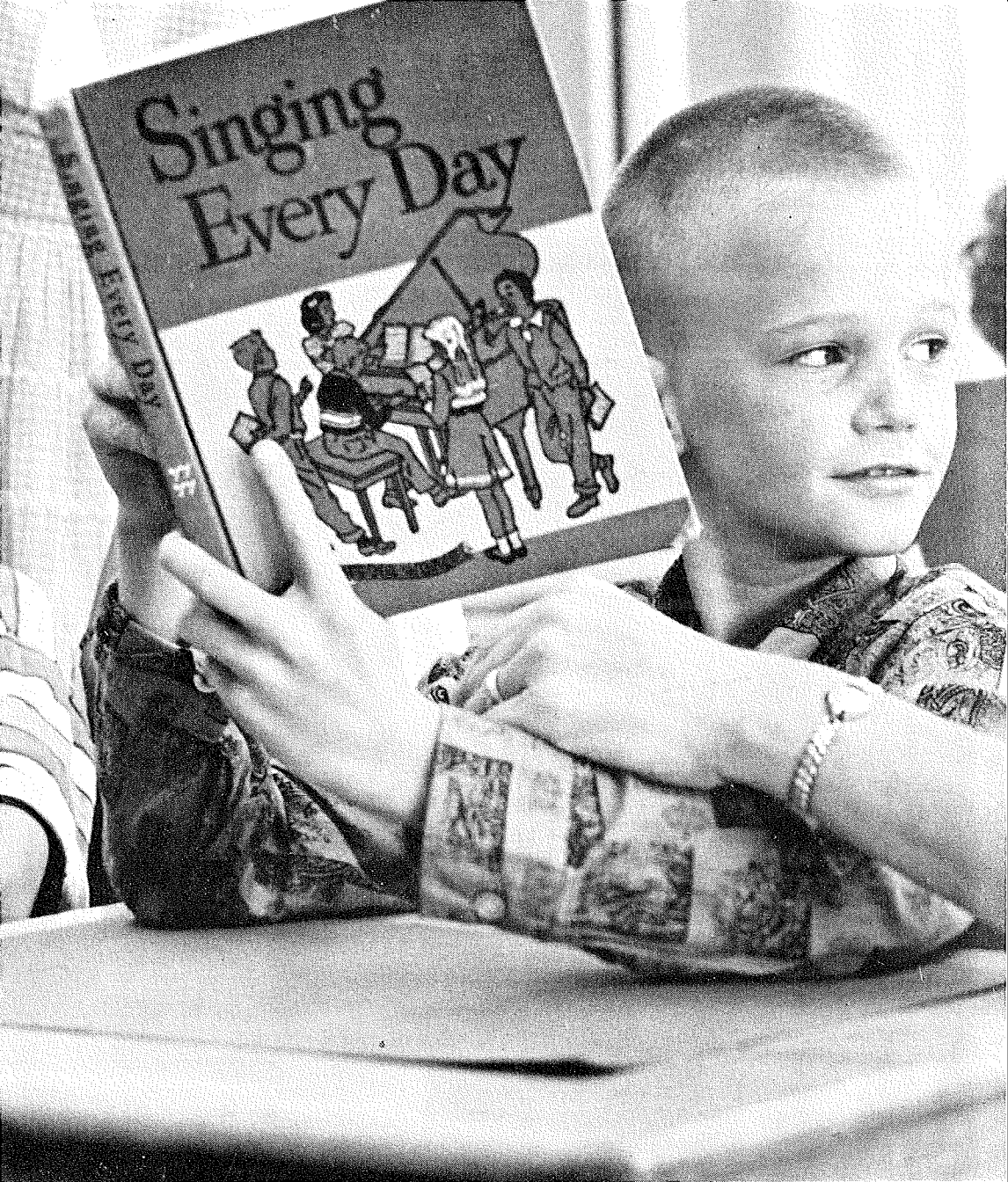


MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Six Years Of Progress

Maine School District Commission 1957-63
Final Report to the 101st Legislature
and the Citizens of Maine

Foreword

In 1957, by act of the 98th Legislature, the "Sinclair Act" became law, and set in motion a program of progress for public education in Maine. Its purpose is to make education for Maine's youth adequate for our modern society; its process is to promote school systems of an efficient size so the purpose can be effectively realized in the most economical manner.

The Maine School District Commission was established to guide the Sinclair Law through its first six years of consolidation. As it nears the completion of this task, and prepares to turn over its functions to the State Board of Education, its members make this report to you, the people of Maine.

Six Years of Progress

The purpose of the "Sinclair Law" (as it has become universally known through its sponsor, Senator Roy U. Sinclair) has been to promote the formation of public school systems large enough to provide adequate education at a reasonable cost.

To go back a little, for some time before 1957 the Legislature was aware that the school populations in many Maine towns were (and still are) so small they could not afford to provide the variety of courses needed by youngsters of differing abilities and interests. This was particularly true in high schools with only a few students; at that time there were 92 high schools in Maine with less than one hundred pupils. In the words of a report made to the 1957 Legislature, "teachers are required to teach several grades and subjects, and special courses are almost non-existent". Opportunities for the 80% of our youth who do not go to college, to learn a salable skill or develop the knowledge for a trade, were non-existent in our small high schools.

So here was the first consideration; many Maine youngsters were being short-changed because their high schools in particular were too small to have adequate instruction or enough courses. And it was apparent that even this inadequate education in the small school was provided at a relatively high cost. It was discovered, for instance, that if the high school with less than 100 students could be increased to 800 students, the per pupil cost would go down as much as 35 per cent! It would, literally, cost 35 per cent less to give more courses and give them with better instruction.

The obvious remedy is to organize bigger school systems where they are too small—and this is the purpose of the Sinclair Law. Communities are urged to band together in school districts to achieve a more judicious use of state and local tax monies. Incentives offered at the state level are higher operational subsidy and school construction aid. District reorganization has been effective in the reduction of the number of small high schools; of the 92 schools with fewer than 100 pupils operating in 1957, only 47 schools of this size were in existence in 1963.

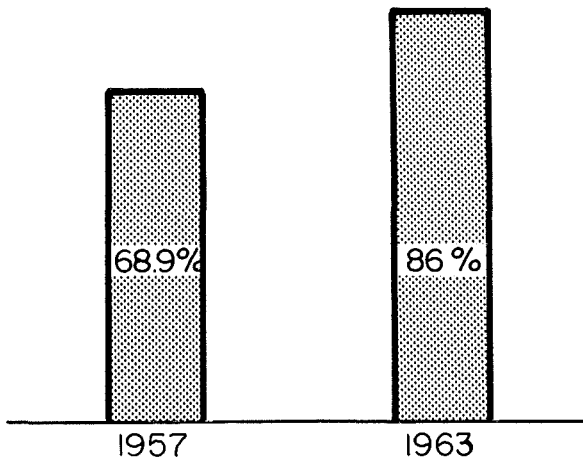
The job is far from done, but our six years of progress have seen one hundred and three towns organize into 32 school districts which can more effectively offer their pupils improved educational opportunities. The larger administrative units operating within the state will become the natural centers for our community colleges of tomorrow.

Progress In Size

Organizing school systems that are large enough to be efficient hasn't been easy, and won't be in the future. Your School District Commission has had to take many things into consideration in each individual case. Some of these are geographical factors, distances to be traveled by pupils, financial capacities of the towns, and so on. Nevertheless, the Commission feels that great progress has been made in the 32 districts now operating.

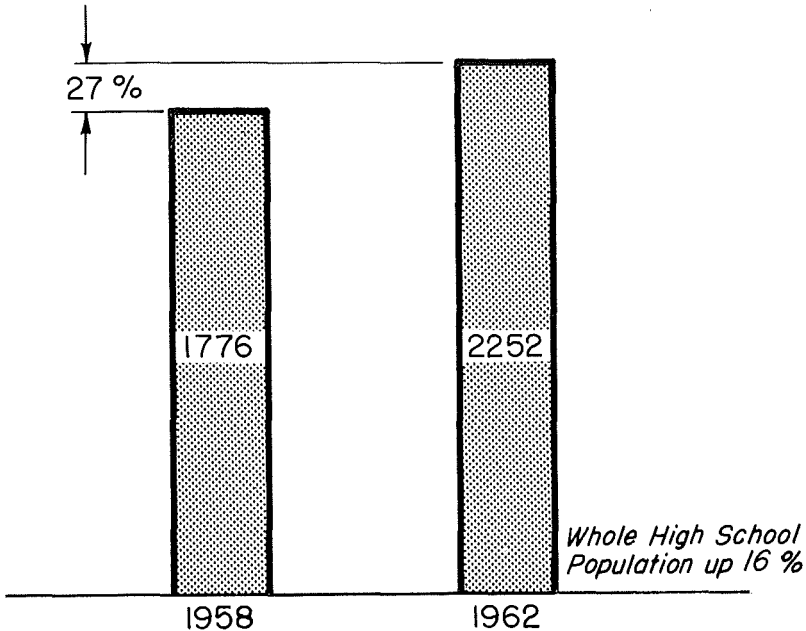
The changes in high schools are most dramatic. The chart below, for instance, shows the numbers (in percentages of totals) of Maine high school pupils who attended schools with more than 200 students before the Law and today.

But this is not the most important change, for if school consolidations are to stand the test of time, they must provide both more and better education. The results indicate they are.



Percentage of high school students in schools of 200 or more.

Progress In Curriculum



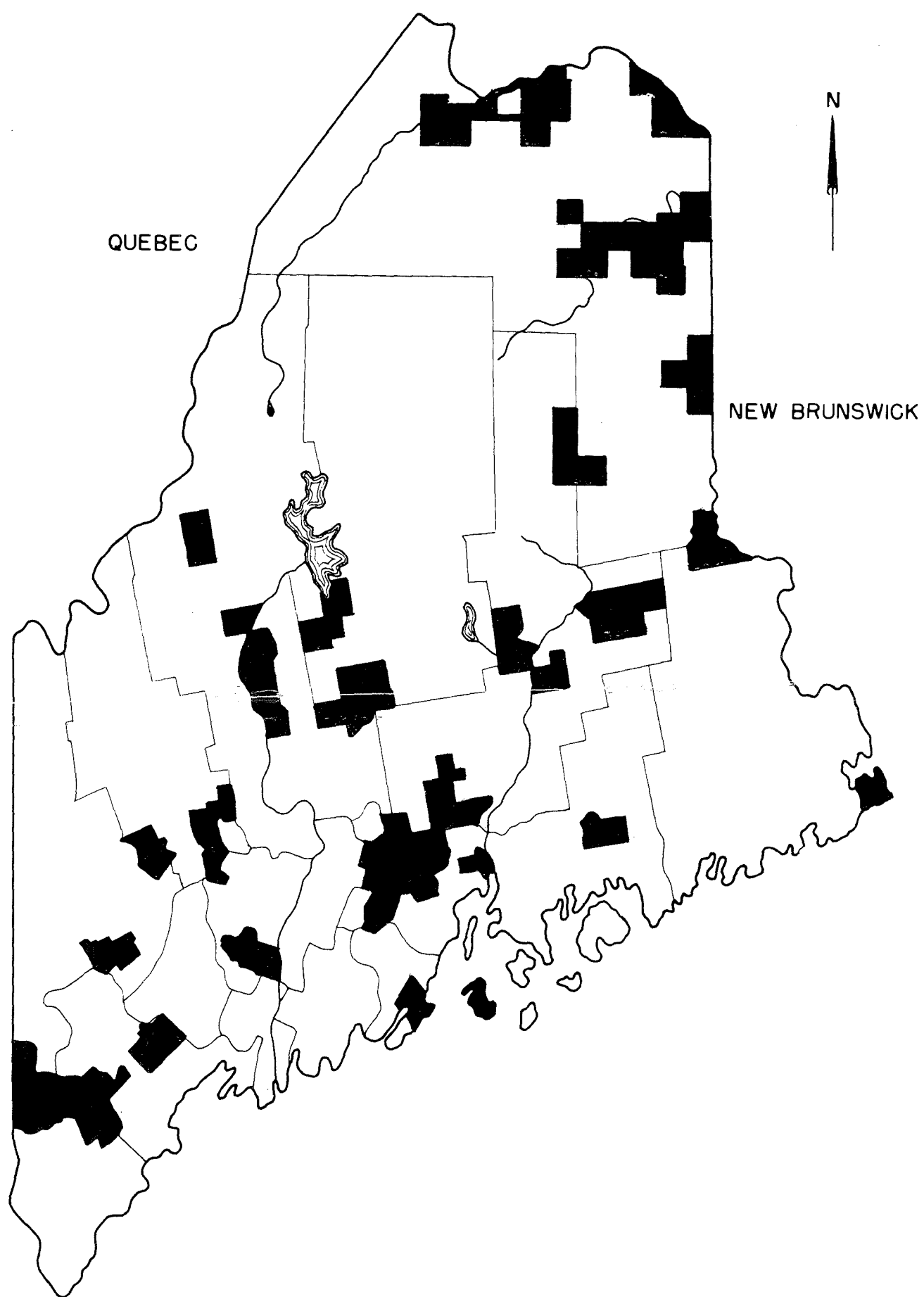
Number of high school students taking vocational courses.

The above chart shows one indication of the result of larger high schools. The smaller school usually does not, because of cost per pupil, provide vocational courses for those not going on to college. Forty per cent of our youngsters still do not graduate from high school—many of them because the high school has nothing they need. Such is wasteful of human talent, since these youngsters are cast adrift without any occupational skills, only to swell the unemployment rolls.

But this isn't all! For many Maine students on all levels, district reorganization has meant the first chance to have a school library, to participate in dramatics, debating and musical activities, to receive remedial instruction, to learn faster through accelerated school programs and to take part in many courses not offered before. More about that on the following pages.

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Dark Areas Are School Administrative Districts Organized Under the Sinclair Law

More On Curriculum

As we have said, if school districts are to stand up, they must give our youngsters more than we are capable of giving them otherwise. Let's run through each part of the school system and show what youngsters are getting in School Administrative Districts that they were not, in many cases, getting before in those towns.

Elementary Schools. A number of one-room rural schools have been closed. And, while we tend to glamorize the old red schoolhouse, sober thought will show its single teacher for many grades, many ages, and its utter lack of such things as libraries, lunch facilities, science teaching and so on, are hardly compatible with an age in which we are seriously talking of flying to the moon. So, on this level, many youngsters are having their first contact with libraries, single grade per teacher, hot lunches, instrumental and vocal music, science teaching facilities, and teachers enough so some attention is had by all.

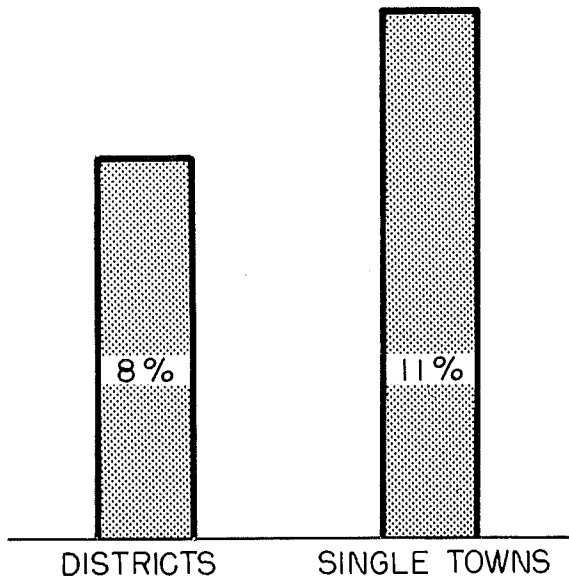
Junior High Schools. Here the pupils are first grouped according to abilities, and are first taught specific subjects by teachers who are specialists. And actually, for many districts, this is the first time any such program has been available at all. For many the district has provided for the first time: a second language, industrial arts courses, home economics, actual laboratory experience in science and physical education.

High Schools. For many students high school is the end of formal education. Here, for the first time in many cases, students who will not go further have had their first chance to take something besides college preparatory or general courses. At the same time, college prep courses are much better. Other district advantages are: transportation to school, grouping by ability, real classroom competition, well equipped laboratories, adequate libraries and teachers who are specialists in the subjects which they teach, to mention only a few.

How About The Cost?

Education will always be expensive. Yet we have to spend as much as needed, since this is the way we make use of our basic resource—human talent; without which we have nothing. What we need to do is to spend the money as efficiently as possible.

In a word, human resources are much better prepared in larger schools, and the cost per pupil is less. The chart below shows one indication of this in our own experience. And for this money in districts we get such things as: better educational opportunities; high school graduates with consistently better academic achievement; fewer drop-outs; better preparation for useful lives for terminal students. Further reorganization of our school systems will bring these advantages, both financial and academic, to the whole state.



How much taxes have risen annually since the Sinclair Law was enacted.

What Should Be Done Now?

Of course, the whole task of bringing Maine's total public school picture up-to-date is not finished. But the members of your School District Commission feel that through close association with each district, during its formation and first months of trial, enough has been learned of our overall needs so that progress can continue.

As a result of its experience during the past six years, the Commission offers the following recommendations for legislative consideration:

1. That school administrative districts be permitted to operate more than one senior high school if the enrollment in each school is adequate to maintain quality of program and economy of operation.
2. The adoption of a uniform local tax effort in support of a basic program of education is essential if all communities are to work for equalized educational opportunities.
3. The legislature should consider the enactment of legislation which would require local officials of all communities not supporting a high school program enrolling 300 or more pupils to submit a re-districting plan to the State Board of Education, and, with State Board approval, to the local voters, at least once every three years until all communities of this size are in reorganized districts.
4. The legislature may wish to adopt legislation, patterned after the legislation of at least 20 other states, placing all communities in reorganized school districts, much as the present school unions were formed in 1917.

*Maine School
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James Russell Lowell said it . . .

"It was in making education not only common to all, but in some sense compulsory on all, that the destiny of the free republics of America was practically settled."