

# First merged district emerges

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HALLOWELL — Education Commissioner Susan Gendron held a special event this week to congratulate the people who helped create the first regional school unit to be approved by voters under the state's new reorganization law.

The new Kennebec Intra-District Schools Regional School Unit (KIDS RSU) was approved overwhelmingly by referendum in all five towns of the future school system at the June 10 election. The new district will include School Administrative District 16 (Hallowell and Farmingdale), Richmond, Monmouth, and Dresden, with more than 2,300 students.

"At the heart of your conversations was the enhancement of learning," Gendron said, during the event at Hall-Dale Elementary School. "Your work really highlights what this legislation was about."

Richmond Superintendent Martha Witham said that the superintendents started working on consolidation efforts in January of 2007 and meeting as a group in February or March, so the consolidation efforts lasted well over a year.

"Our main reason was not to save money. We know initially we won't be saving money," she said. "We just believed that in joining this RSU, we'll have better opportunities for our kids."

Although the RSU doesn't start until July 1, 2009, Witham said those opportunities will begin even sooner since the RSU members will be piloting a special education collaborative for the 2008-09 school year, with two co-directors. Richmond has about 22 percent of the total special education students in the new RSU.

"We're hoping that, for one thing, it will enable us to set up some professional opportunities for special education staff, and to get consistency among the programs," she said.

Richmond will have three representatives on the new RSU school board of 12 members. Elections for those representatives will be held in November.

Seth Goodall, a Richmond selectman, served on the reorganization planning committee as a municipal representative. He also chaired the governance subcommittee.

"The best thing about the whole project was that we were able to work collaboratively together, with a very challenging situation, and create a proposal that provided greater opportunity for our children," he said.

Those educational opportunities could include co-curricular and foreign language instruction as well as technology improvements in Richmond schools, Goodall said. Where distance will be a challenge, technology may be able to bring opportunities such as language instruction to the RSU schools, Goodall said. Hall-Dale schools in Hallowell and Farmingdale have been nationally recognized for their exceptional technology program.

Goodall said one of the important things to the five towns was to make sure there was no one large school that could potentially swallow up one of the smaller schools. The five towns also had similar financial situations, population bases and philosophies, so local control was spread evenly among the communities.

"Hopefully the trust and cooperation will move forward for generations to come," Goodall said.

The RSU plan passed June 10 by a total of 2,211 to 590 in the five towns.

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