



MARANACOOK AREA SCHOOLS RSU 38

A Caring School Community Dedicated to Excellence

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Dear RSU 38 Community Members,

I want to start by saying something simple: *I hear you*. The questions raised by some about the future of our elementary schools are not just understandable; they are exactly the right ones to ask. Your schools matter deeply to you, they matter deeply to me, and I know they matter to the RSU board as well. So does ensuring that every child in RSU 38 has access to a high-quality, equitable education, and so does being responsible stewards of the public trust and the tax dollars our communities invest in their schools. Those commitments are not in conflict; they are the foundation of everything this work is about.

The RSU 38 community deserves clarity about where things stand. To the extent there has been confusion about the work of RSU 38, I want to take a few minutes to ensure all in our communities have a shared understanding of what the RSU board has approved, what issues remain open, and what I am asking of you before we can move this conversation forward.

What the Board Has Approved. The first action, approving a change to our Pre-K programming, came in December as part of RSU 38's planned transition within the Child Development Services Cohort 3 model — before FY27 budget planning had begun. That decision established a new foundation for how we support our youngest learners across the district. What that means for children is earlier, more consistent access to the support and services that help them arrive at Kindergarten ready to learn.

The second action, consolidating our Kindergarten program, came as a direct response to the board's direction to identify potential cost savings for FY27. As we reviewed programs and structures across our district, we identified an important reality we want to share. In some instances, class sizes in our elementary schools have become very small. In a few cases, the same small group of children moves through every school year together, with limited opportunity to encounter new perspectives or expand their social world.

Research tells us that children learn best — socially and academically — when they have a variety of peers to work with, see things differently from, and learn alongside. Teachers working alone at a grade level face a similar challenge: they lack a colleague with whom to plan or from whom to learn. Research and experience tell us that children and teachers tend to do their best work when they have a community around them — peers to learn alongside, and colleagues to learn with. Consolidating Kindergarten at Readfield and Manchester Elementary School for 2026–27 addresses both realities simultaneously. Know that this is a temporary decision, and the question of how we organize our schools beyond this year is one that the strategic planning process will take up — with our whole community at the table.

Third, the board approved launching a community-centered strategic planning process so that we, as a school community, can carefully examine the long-term future of our district. This work is rooted in the vision our four communities established when they came together in 2009. Manchester, Mount Vernon, Readfield, and Wayne built RSU 38 on a commitment to ensuring that all stakeholders had an opportunity to share their voices before the Board decides issues of importance to us all, and the strategic planning process we are undertaking now directly honors that commitment. It asks the larger question that only our community can answer together: how do we ensure that every RSU 38 student, at every grade level, has the learning environment they deserve? I know any change affecting our children and their families requires thoughtful communication and genuine support, and I am fully committed to both. Your involvement drives this process. It does not begin with an answer. Your voices, your concerns, and your participation have the potential to shape what the strategic plan genuinely considers.

Three Realities We Are Facing Together. Our communities deserve honesty, and honesty means naming the pressures our district is navigating. Enrollment across RSU 38 has declined by 25 percent over the past two decades, and projections indicate the trend will continue. That decline reflects broader demographic shifts across rural Maine, but it has real consequences for how we staff our schools and sustain the programs our students deserve.

Several of our school buildings are aging and will require significant investment to remain safe and educationally sound. Planning thoughtfully for those needs is part of what it means to take care of our students and our communities.

The third pressure is financial. Maine's state education subsidy to RSU 38 has decreased due to the funding formula. As our enrollment declines, the state calculates that we need less support. And as property values in our four towns have risen, the state calculates that local taxpayers have greater capacity to pay. Over time, that shift has placed an increasingly unsustainable burden on families and property owners in Manchester, Mount Vernon, Readfield, and Wayne.

These pressures shape the questions we must ask together. They do not dictate the answers. The final outcome of the planning process we are about to undertake may look different than what any of us imagines today. Although some in our communities have raised the possibility of

consolidating or closing elementary schools, please know that this is not an issue we have considered in any depth, and no direction has been set. What I am committed to is that when we examine every option through our planning process, we do so honestly and as a whole district, across every school, every program, and every community, with every stakeholder having an opportunity to share their perspective.

An Invitation to Work Together. Our schools are not just buildings. They are gathering places, sources of community pride, and part of what makes each of our towns feel like home. I bring that understanding to every conversation about our district's future, and I want to share it with you. The strategic planning process opens meaningful opportunities for families and community members, not just to listen, but to contribute. I will communicate proactively at every step. Board meetings are open to the public, and I genuinely welcome direct conversation with anyone who has questions or concerns about our school system. Please reach out to me, your board representatives, or both. These conversations are not a distraction from the work; they are the work.

We are stronger when we face hard things together. I believe that about this community, and I am grateful every day to serve it.

With respect and appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen G. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Karen G. Smith
RSU 38 Superintendent of Schools