

Author Takes the Long View on Public Education in Maine

BY JACQUELINE WEAVER

LAMOINE — Gordon Donaldson believes in the long view, particularly when it comes to education.

So, when he decided to write about education in Maine, he looked at 100 years — from the turn of the 20th century until 2000.

The result, "From Schoolhouse to Schooling System: Maine Public Education in the 20th Century," examines schools in six communities — Peru, Anson, Lubec, Houlton, Cumberland and Bangor.

Donaldson said his selection was based on geographic spread, varying size and the fact that the communities represent three types of trajectories in terms of growth or loss of population and economic vitality.

"My book allows us to see trends in enrollment, in staffing, in school closures and construction and in expenditures and revenue," he said. "It's very valuable to see how these trends interact."

Donaldson is a professor, emeritus of education at the University of Maine whose 40-year career spans teaching seventh-graders and serving as principal of a high school.

There were many more schools at the turn of the 19th century than now. The buildings were less important than what went on inside, Donaldson said.

Most were one-room schoolhouses. Some were mobile. The rural schools of Limestone in the late teens and 1920s were moved from place to place on runners.

But with time came mandates, accountability and intrusion by the state and federal governments. It is questionable, Donaldson said, whether the directives have improved education.

"It has always required more

than legislation, task force reports and high-minded rhetoric to alter conditions so that more children are educated 'to a higher standard' than in the past," he said.

"Despite prolonged efforts to fabricate a schooling system, education itself continued to be shaped by the environments within each Maine schoolhouse and its surrounding community."

Donaldson said a positive change over the century was that while only 5 percent of the population graduated from high school in 1900, the graduation rate today is more than 90 percent.

Another improvement is that teaching is more rigorous and specialized, he said, although teacher pay and preparation continue to be underfunded.

On the down side, said Donaldson, is consolidation of schools into larger districts.

This, he said, has forced some students into longer bus rides and larger schools.

As a result more parents are choosing private schools and home-schooling, Donaldson said.

Donaldson was a key player in a decision last year by Ellsworth, Hancock and Lamoine voters to withdraw from Regional School Unit 24 (RSU 24).

The state's forced consolidation of schools "was a case of 1920s-style thinking being applied to the 21st century world," Donaldson said.

He also said the trend of grouping teachers in larger schools for the purpose of professional improvement was outdated by 1980.

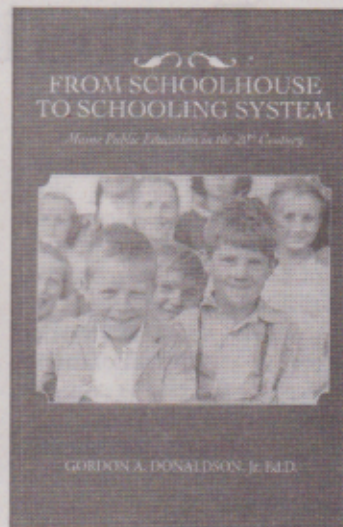
By that time, professional knowledge and development were readily available, and sending students to larger schools held no value, he said.

"So the 2007 consolidation law made next to zero sense educationally," Donaldson said. "I suspect it helped in some places, but damaged schooling and public support for schooling in many others."

Asked whether history shows whether the current testing frenzy will likely continue, he said testing for testing's sake is likely to disappear, but gathering good data to help children will continue if it's affordable and doesn't overly intrude into teaching time.

Internet-based educational opportunities are well suited to rural Maine, he said, yet at the same time Maine schools would do well to "recapture a valuable role they once played: the role of partner to parents and families."

The book was published by Maine Authors Publishing in Rockland and may be purchased by emailing



schoolhouse@maine.edu.

The cost is \$20.95, minus shipping charge and tax.

Proceeds from the book will be used to establish a scholarship fund to support graduate study in education.