

Threads of Implementation: A Thematic Review of Six Case Studies of Maine School Districts Implementing Proficiency-Based/Learner-Centered Systems

Researcher: Gary Chapin

Beginning in February 2012, the Maine Department of Education through its [Center for Best Practice](#) (Center) began publishing a series of in-depth case studies of school districts who were implementing proficiency-based/learner-centered systems. These districts were in very different stages of their implementation journeys. For example, the member districts of the [Western Maine Education Collaborative](#) (WMEC) were just beginning implementation while [Poland Regional High School](#) (of [RSU 16](#)) had been completely proficiency-based since it opened in 1999. Though each of the districts featured in the Center over the last two years took decidedly different paths on their way to change, there were common themes that emerged throughout the case studies. Their experiences serve as lessons for other Maine districts just beginning this transition in preparation for all schools in the state issuing diplomas starting in 2018 to students based on demonstrated proficiency.

Vision and Framework

All districts involved in making this change considered it vitally important to engage in a vision-setting process that made explicit certain assumptions. This visioning process came at different times for each district. For [RSU 18](#), the visioning process – a Future Search – happened early. The school board invited 80 stakeholders to participate in a process that would answer the question: “What do great schools look like? And what should kids learn in great schools?” [RSU 2](#) went through a similar process, but engaged in it after individual schools had been working on proficiency-based issues for years – in fact, their visioning process came only after a significant pushback from parents. The individual schools of [RSU 20](#) had clear visions of their own, but the district as a whole did not. When the individual schools came together to form RSU 20, one of the early acts of the new school board was to approve a proficiency-based vision for the district (though individual schools were free to choose their own way to approach this vision).

As with RSU 18, conversations in all districts and the WMEC about vision started with leadership, the administration and school boards. The purpose of the visioning process – along with setting the vision, of course – has been to enlarge the circle of the conversation by drawing in parents, community members, teachers and students. A clear vision has given district leadership a place to stand when the process became difficult. Some districts went beyond a vision and used these processes to craft strategic plans. While the vision remained relatively fixed, the strategic plan was revisited frequently to ensure that it continued to serve the district.

A number of districts, when going through this visioning process, adopted specific frameworks to guide their change work. Schools in the Maine Cohort for Customized

Learning, for example, began by following the Reinventing Schools Coalition (RISC) framework.

Policy

The [proficiency-based diploma \(PBD\) law](#) passed in 2012 took advantage of one of the few points of leverage available to the State: the setting of diploma requirements. The passage of this law – and the granting of transition funds from the Maine DOE to all of the districts – provided the mandate to move towards a proficiency-based system. For districts whose leadership wanted to move in that direction already, it provided cover from resistant faculty or community members. Participants agreed that the passage of the legislation helped to frame the current moment as being appropriate for change.

The PBD law, while it mandated that diplomas be awarded according to the demonstration of proficiency in all standards, did not dictate the specifics of how districts would achieve this. It was a matter of local control to determine graduation policies. At the time the Maine DOE's case studies were released, none of the participating districts had policies in place that reflected the requirement that diplomas be awarded according to achievement of the standards, and that students were required to demonstrate proficiency in all standards.

Those featured in the case studies also felt that working on policies district-by-district would be unproductive. A number of participants voiced the expectation that policy work would be done at a higher level. Three groups – the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning, the Maine School Management Association and the New England Secondary Schools Consortium – were mentioned as organizations where policy work might ideally be done.

Leadership

A number of participants discussed the quality of leadership required for this work. Leadership must be genuinely shared, according to participants. More authoritarian forms of leadership would endanger meaningful change work. A number of participants pointed to a tension between the “top down” leadership and the “grassroots” shared leadership. Districts need to have the teachers engaged, committed to the process, participating in decisions and a part of the conversation. But at some point, decisions have to be made and policies have to be set and enforced locally. No one suggested that this tension could be solved – or even that it was necessarily damaging – merely that it must be acknowledged and navigated.

Teacher Engagement

A vital early factor for the districts and schools making this change has been the engagement of teachers. For most districts, engagement comes either in response to a crisis – as when Searsport District High School lost its accreditation – or it comes from a long slow process of a few teachers getting involved in training, then a few more, then

many more, etc. In most cases, there is a point where the faculty is brought together for a vote to determine whether a proficiency-based, learner-centered path is one the district should take. Participants in those votes – at [RSU 57](#), for example, where over 80 percent of the district faculty voted to pursue proficiency – remember those meetings as being professionally and personally significant.

All case study participants recognized that the process of engaging teachers could be difficult, and that much depends on the culture of the schools involved. RSU 20, for example, has two high schools with such different cultures that each is engaging in the shift to proficiency-based/learner-centered practices entirely separately. In the WMEC, the 11 participating districts have hired a systems change specialist to help them plant the seeds and grow the conversation to the faculty in a way that suits each district. The one method of engagement that was universally lauded as successful was showing teachers what proficiency-based/learner-centered practices looked like in the classroom. Conversations could begin by looking at videos of learner-centered classrooms, but teacher participants very enthusiastically endorsed the practice of visiting schools that are doing this work. Those who had visited such schools cited it as very valuable while those who had not stated that such a visit was necessary.

Finance and Professional Development

While there is no inherent direct cost to implementing a proficiency-based/learner-centered education system, case study districts indicated that significant funds were expended on structural changes, some staff, technology, and most importantly, professional development. (It should be noted that it was only following the completion of the case studies on which this analysis is based that the Maine DOE distributed the first round of \$2 million in annual grant funds to all school administrative districts to support transition costs not otherwise subsidized by the State.)

In a few districts, some form of grant money was used to subsidize professional development, for example Promising Futures and Great Maine Schools Grants. Most schools, though, met these financial needs by redirected their current professional development budgets towards proficiency-based/learner-centered trainings. Districts with access to Title 2A grants directed the entirety of those funds towards trainings. Some schools – if they had been declared a Continuous Improvement School (known as CIPS) – used their dedicated funds to provide training in aspects of proficiency-based/learner-centered practice, such as formative assessment.

Aside from professional development, districts have spent funds on dedicating staff to facilitating the change process in their buildings, purchasing grading software that supports reporting according to standards and hiring outside consultants to provide in-school coaching.

Technology

One of the persistent worries of participating districts is that of technology. A learner-centered system necessitates a dynamic, powerful technological infrastructure to allow students to use individualized pathways to meet standards. This has been furthered by the Maine DOE's Maine Learning Technology Initiative program, but participating districts are looking for even more digital resources.

It was universally agreed among case study participants that a digital solution is required for reporting and tracking student progress in a proficiency-based system. Otherwise, as many participants said, the system will "collapse under the weight of its own paper." Reporting software typically serves two purposes: tracking students' progress and communicating that progress to parents.

The differences between traditional grading systems and proficiency-based grading systems are fundamental, and finding a system that would allow the tracking of students according to standards has been a significant challenge. The Maine Cohort for Customized Learning engaged the producers of Educate – the software used by RISC schools in Alaska – to customize its software to suit the needs of its districts. Other districts have tried to combine existing packages to fulfill their need or are looking for packages that might serve their emerging needs.

Communications

The universal regret of many of the administrators interviewed was that they "should have gotten the parents involved sooner," meaning they should have begun communicating with parents earlier in the change process. There is a fear in some districts about community resistance, primarily because in two districts vocal parent groups arose in opposition to proficiency-based/learner-centered systems.

In addition to involving parents sooner, participant districts have thought about their methods of communication. Rather than just holding a traditional large public meeting where the speaker talks at a gathering of parents, districts are getting more creative with their communication. One district, after a disastrous large public meeting, invited parents in for a spaghetti dinner followed by a series of small table discussions. The hope was that contacts with parents would be opportunities for conversation in which parents and community members could sort out what the change process meant.

While many participants expressed a desire to have done things differently, all participants affirmed that no amount of communications savvy would prevent parent opposition. Districts that felt they had been successful in communications talked about inviting parents in frequently to discuss anxieties and worries. These conversations were sometimes one-on-one and often very lengthy. Districts, according to participants, need to recognize that community members can be at any stage of the change process at any time.

Pace of Implementation

The question of how quickly districts should implement change was another universal theme. All districts reported that there were factions in their faculty who felt the pace of change was much too slow, while simultaneously there were factions who thought the pace was much too fast. Two factors were cited as influencing the pace of implementation. The first was politics. How quickly could the community reasonably adapt to a fundamental shift in culture? If they were pressed to move too quickly, the community would withdraw support from the district. The second factor was capacity. How quickly could the faculty and students develop the capacity to succeed within this system?

In a number of districts, these factors were different for different buildings within the district. In RSU 2, for example, Hall-Dale High School implemented standards-based reporting one year at a time, beginning with freshmen, then sophomores and so on. Monmouth High School, in the same district, implemented for the freshmen in their first year, but then implemented for the entire school the second year. The requirements of the students at each school, and the willingness of the communities, influenced these decisions.

Cultural Change

All participant districts recognized that the shift to proficiency-based/learner-centered practices reflected a profound change in the curriculum, instruction and assessment in the district. This was more than a change in some specific technique – for example, schools taking on professional learning communities. It was a change in the culture of the school district, and a change in its values. Most obviously, for example, the value of “having the student pass this class” was now replaced by “having the student demonstrate proficiency in the standards.”

How to approach and facilitate this cultural change was a concern for all district leaders. Often they referred to Judy Enright, a consultant to the WMEC and the Northern Maine Education Collaborative, who quoted the maxim, “Change happens one conversation at a time.” System change – as opposed to technical change – seemed intangible, though they all recognized that it was necessary. Some districts had adopted a systems change model – for example, Schwahn and Spady’s Total Leader 2.0– but most were still researching possibilities and engaging their colleagues in discussion.

Conclusion

The Maine DOE is committed to the work moving toward proficiency-based/learned-centered practices and supporting the successful implementation of the proficiency-based diploma law in all Maine schools. The themes that emerged during the Center for Best Practice case study interviews are informative for the Department’s work and that of the field moving forward. The learnings of these early adopters can help the districts that will be soon begin this transition. For example, featured districts noted they devoted

significant funding to professional development and this knowledge could help others with their budget planning, including provide direction on how to best spend the \$2 million in annual transition grants distributed by the Department. The Maine DOE will continue to develop and share [resources](#) – including those provided directly by Maine schools – in its Center for Best Practice and [Getting to Proficiency website](#) to help districts most effectively address each of these identified areas of focus and others that emerge between now and full statewide implementation in 2018.

This Center for Best Practice is a collaboration between the Maine Department of Education and the [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#), made possible by the contributions of the Maine schools that share their stories.