

Maine

Making the Most of High-Leverage Strategies

A FOCUS SECTION FROM **Reaching the Tipping Point: Insights on Advancing Competency Education in New England.** *Read the complete Issue Brief at* **CompetencyWorks.**

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About CompetencyWorks

CompetencyWorks is a collaborative initiative drawing on the knowledge of practitioners, its partners, and an advisory board. The International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL) is the lead organization, with project management facilitated by MetisNet.



For more information on competency education, you can visit CompetencyWorks.org, read previous issue briefs on the topic, or visit the [Competency-Based Pathways wiki](#) for an in-depth look at the working definition.

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MAINE
Making the Most of
High-Leverage Strategies
RSU-2
Casco Bay High School
University of Maine at Presque Isle

Maine's journey to a proficiency-based diploma can best be described as a bottom-up and top-down process. In 2007 and 2008, districts in Maine began the journey to personalized, proficiency-based systems. First, the Department of Education began to partner with the Reinventing Schools Coalition (RISC) to provide training to districts on how to engage communities in creating shared vision, help teachers learn how to create the culture and practices for personalized learning, and convert to proficiency-based systems. The DOE then provided limited funding to those districts interested in creating more personalized learning experiences to continue ideas outlined by the RISC. When this funding was discontinued, vested districts created a professional community of learners, the **Maine Cohort for Customized Learning**.

With extensive district collaboration, the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning became a catalyst for personalized, proficiency-based learning in Maine. The MCCL districts played a powerful role as proof points when the Department of Education organized a statewide listening tour, followed thereafter by legislative tours that launched state-level conversations and informed the strategic plan **Education Evolving**. The result was the passage of **LD1422, An Act To Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy** by the state legislature in 2012.

LD1422 requires a *standards-based education system* that enables multiple pathways for pursuing and demonstrating learning, leading up to a *proficiency-based diploma*. It also requires the Department of Education to provide specific types of support and technical assistance to districts.

The standards-based system is organized around the Maine Learning Results, established in 1997 and upgraded in 2011. Maine's proficiency-based diploma policy requires students to be proficient in eight content areas – Career & Education Development, English Language Arts, Health Education & Physical Education, Mathematics, Science & Technology, Social Studies, Visual & Performing Arts, and World Languages – as well as the five cross-disciplinary Guiding Principles.

Maine Definition of Proficiency-Based Education

Any system of academic instruction, assessment, grading, and reporting that is based on students demonstrating mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn before they progress to the next lesson, get promoted to the next grade level, or receive a diploma.

MANAGING THE TIMELINE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Maine has demonstrated the principles of a proficiency-based system in creating flexible pacing of implementation and adjustments in timelines to fully introduce the proficiency-based diploma. The original legislative deadline for implementation was 2017. In 2014, the Department introduced the district self-assessment process that allowed districts to request implementation timelines based on the progress in implementation, with new deadlines stretching to 2020. In 2016, the **legislature revised the policy** in response to concerns about helping all students achieve proficiency in all eight domains, instead choosing to phase in the graduation requirements. The graduation requirements will increase, starting with four domains for the 2021 graduating class, adding in student choice of additional domains for the next three years, and then requirements of all eight domains for the graduating class of 2025.

SUPPORT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The support from the Maine Department of Education has changed over time partially in response to funding availability and partially because of the political context. There have been several high-leverage strategies that have had a strong impact. One of these strategies was the early decision to support a small group of districts that were a “coalition of the willing.” They were provided with professional development from the Reinventing Schools Coalition, which laid the groundwork for a strong understanding of the culture and practices needed for a proficiency-based system that enables students to become more self-directed and teachers to personalize instruction. Another strategy was that the district self-assessment process required all districts, even those that were the most hesitant to move forward, to engage in reflecting upon what they had in place and how they might move forward to create a standards-based system and proficiency-based diploma. Lastly, in collaboration with Great Schools Partnership, the Department’s strategy to provide exemplars and samples provided supports to districts while still respecting local decision-making in creating a standards-based system.

RECOMMENDED READING: UNDERSTANDING MAINE’S GUIDING PRINCIPLES



The guide **Understanding Maine’s Guiding Principles** introduces a research-based framework to help students advance through four levels – beginner, advanced beginner, strategic learner, and emerging expert – in the five guiding principles:

- A Clear and Effective Communicator. Understands the attributes and techniques that positively impact constructing and conveying meaning for a variety of purposes and through a variety of modes.
- A Self-Directed and Lifelong Learner. Understands the importance of embracing and nurturing a growth mindset.
- A Creative and Practical Problem Solver. Is skilled at selecting and applying a process of problem-solving to deepen understanding and determine whether redefining the goal is a better way of addressing a problem situation and continuing to consider other alternative solutions until one resonates as the best one.
- A Responsible and Involved Citizen. Understands the interdependence within and across systems and brings to each situation the appropriate actions.
- An Integrative and Informed Thinker. Is skilled at using complex reasoning processes to make meaning.



The Maine Department of Education has provided a series of supports, including:

- **Professional Development Opportunities:** In the early stages of implementation, the Department provided professional development opportunities for district teams that wanted to create a personalized, proficiency-based system.
- **Resources:** Early in implementation, the Department created the **Center for Best Practices** that housed **videos** to allow viewers to hear directly from educators and students about proficiency-based learning, **case studies**, and resources from those districts that were making steady progress in implementation. Over time, the Department created a section on their website called **Getting to Proficiency** that includes statutory requirements, policy exemplars, and **frequently asked questions**.
- **Transition Funds:** LD1422 requires the Department of Education to provide funds to support the cost of the transition to a proficiency-based diploma. Since 2013, each school administrative unit has received funding based on a formula of 1/9th of 1 percent of that SAU's total cost of education. This element of the legislation has directed millions of dollars to districts to support the transition.
- **Exemplars:** In collaboration with the Great Schools Partnership and MCCL, the Department of Education developed **exemplar graduation standards and aligned performance indicators**, which Maine schools can use or adopt when creating their own system of local learning standards and proficiency-based graduation requirements. The exemplar standards are aligned with the **Maine Learning Results**, which encompass the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics, and the Next Generation Science Standards in science and technology.
- **District Self-Assessment:** In the spirit of proficiency-based learning, the Department provided flexibility in implementation based on the submission of **district self-assessment** of their progress in implementing the standards-based system. The self-assessment tools submitted by each district were also made public on the Maine DOE website, creating opportunities for districts to look at how others were moving forward. In addition, the Maine DOE offered a sample **implementation plan for proficiency-based learning**.
- **Networks:** Maine's success in implementing proficiency-based learning statewide has been due in large part to the comfort of districts in working collaboratively with networks, both topical and geographic. In addition to the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning, twenty-five secondary schools belong to the League of Innovative Schools, sponsored by the New England Secondary Schools Consortium. Districts are also taking advantage of eight regional collaboratives. For example, the **Northern Maine Education Collaborative** (NMEC) was created to support seventeen rural districts in creating a proficiency-based system. These networks have been helpful in sharing costs of professional development and purchasing, sharing best practices, and leadership development.



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A LOOK AT EARLY ADOPTERS IN MAINE

Maine’s educators have taken on the challenge to figure out how to help all of their students become proficient. Everywhere you go in Maine, there are districts and schools discussing issues such as learning, how to help students reach proficiency, strategies to support teachers, and how to re-align instruction and assessment around higher order skills. There are also important and sometimes painful conversations about how to help students with learning disabilities or substantial gaps in skills get on track to a diploma within four years and how to create more responsiveness in younger grades so more students enter higher school with or close to grade level skills.

RSU2

The RSU2 school board has demonstrated the type of leadership and courage needed for districts to stay the course through the bumps in the road that always emerge in implementation. They have hired three superintendents over the past six years, all of whom believe deeply in the promise of proficiency-based learning, adaptive leadership styles that engage others in problem-solving, and the need to seek ways to continually improve the system.

RSU2 was originally trained in proficiency-based learning by the Reinventing Schools Coalition with a standards-based structure based on measurement topics and learning targets. They have also worked on improving instruction by drawing from the Art and Science of Instruction by Marzano and deeper personalized approaches with training by Bea McGarvey.

They have now introduced a new wave of innovation, as they realized students need more opportunities and instructional support to apply their learning. They are working at the secondary school level to reorganize the schedule so students continue to build foundational skills while also having more opportunity for engaging applied learning opportunities.

There are also efforts underway to explore how to better meet the needs of students who are missing prerequisite skills. RSU2 found that even though they were four years into implementation, some teachers were still being driven by covering the grade level standards. There are now deeper conversations taking place about how to respond to students instructionally and systemically in order to build their foundational skills in ways that will lead to their eventually getting to grade level.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Building a High Quality Proficiency-Based District.***

UNDERSTANDING ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTATION IN MAINE

The Maine legislature asked the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) to investigate **the implementation of proficiency-based learning**. To date, the following studies have been completed:

- **Proficiency-based High School Diploma System in Maine: Local Implementation of State Standards-based Policy, Phase IV Policy Report**, Erika Stump, Bernadette Doykos & Catherine Fallona. (2016)
 - **Implementation of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System: Early Experiences in Maine**, Erika K. Stump & David L. Silvernail. (2014)
 - **Implementation of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System in Maine: Phase II - District Level Analysis**, David L. Silvernail, Erika K. Stump, Anita Stewart McCafferty & Kathryn M. Hawes. (2014)
 - **Preliminary Implementation of Maine’s Proficiency-Based Diploma Program**, David L. Silvernail, Erika K. Stump, Angela Atkinson Duina & Lori Moran Gunn. (2013)
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CASCO BAY HIGH SCHOOL

Casco Bay High School in Portland has become a national example of how a proficiency-based structure can be integrated with a robust pedagogy that emphasizes communities of learners, real-world inquiry-based curriculum, and authentic student work that emphasizes higher order skills. (Casco Bay is an **EL Education** school, previously referred to as Expeditionary Learning.) At one New York City school, an assistant principal explained that “when we grow up, we hope to be like Casco Bay.”



We want the grading system to reward students for doing their personal best even if they aren't at grade level. Our system reflects their progress and their habits of work.

– DEREK PIERCE, PRINCIPAL, CASCO BAY HIGH SCHOOL, MAINE

The learning community is a huge part of the student experience at Casco Bay. Students are placed in grade-based Crews, which are groups of around fifteen students (and one teacher) who act as a sort of “family.” These Crews do whatever it takes to support one another through the educational process, including building agency and real world skills, working together to navigate the tricky waters of college admissions, and even walking together to receive their diplomas.

Casco Bay emphasizes student agency and helping students to build the habits of work they need to be successful in school and the workplace. Their proficiency-based structure is organized around transparent learning targets – long-term, short-term, daily, and habits of work – each with their own rubrics and exemplars. As long as students “get a 3 on the big 3” (homework, attendance, and meeting deadlines), they can have flexibility in pacing and opportunity for reassessments.

Casco has developed a strong **standards-based grading system**. This system ensures that students get regular feedback, build upon their habits of work, and have opportunities to excel. The scoring system is used for both learning and habits of work with 2=approaches, 3=meets, and 3.25-4=exceeds. As one teacher explained, “A 1 means you didn't turn in, 2 means you need to revise, 3 is you've reached proficiency, and above that, you are stretching yourself to excel.”



You can say “graduate by proficiency.” You can say whatever you want about “every kids has to.” Until you establish a relationship with a child, nothing is going to happen.

– LESLIE APPLEBAUM, TEACHER, CASCO BAY HIGH SCHOOL, MAINE

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Learning as Exploration** and Springpoint School's **Inside Mastery-Based High Schools**.*

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE AT PRESQUE ISLE

Proficiency-based education is also taking root in some institutions of higher education in Maine. The University of Maine at Presque Isle sees proficiency-based learning as an opportunity for first-time college goers. It can

more effectively address any skills gaps students enter with, ensure students can apply skills, and possibly reduce debt ratio by enabling faster routes to completion. Unlike many of the other competency-based programs in higher education that are primarily online courses, UMPI is organizing their approach throughout the campus.

At UMPI, there are twenty-three essential learning outcomes within the five categories of: effective written and oral communication; critical and creative thinking; quantitative and scientific reasoning; information literacy; and global consciousness and intercultural awareness. Each essential learning outcome is graded with its own rubric.

In their transition to proficiency-based learning, UMPI relies on three questions to guide them:

- How do you design pedagogy to ensure students are becoming proficient?
- How do you link to student support services for students who need extra help?
- What tools are needed for faculty to know how students are doing?

Twenty faculty members received professional development in research-based instructional strategies during the first year of implementation with the goal of providing more voice and choice to faculty and organizing student experiences around specific learning targets. UMPI is also strengthening their internship program so that students can build and apply their essential learning skills in the real world.

As the districts in the Northern Maine Education Collaborative build their proficiency-based systems, there is potential for a partnership with UMPI to create the first proficiency-based K-16 pipeline in the country.

*Adapted from CompetencyWorks case study **Moving at the Speed of Light**.*

MAINE'S CORE PRIORITIES

In 2012, the Commissioner of Education released Education Evolving, a strategic plan with five core priorities.

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

1. Rigorous standards and aligned curricula
2. Learner-centered instructional practices
3. Assessment systems that provide timely, accurate data on achievement and growth
4. Information systems that track learner growth over time

Great Teachers and Leaders

1. Common standards for teacher and leader effectiveness
2. Initial preparation and professional development programs that are rigorous, relevant, and data-driven
3. Next-generation evaluation systems for teachers and leaders
4. Communities of practice designed to foster continuous improvement

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

1. Advancement based on demonstration of mastery
2. Student voice and choice in the demonstration of learning
3. Expanded learning options
4. "Anytime, anywhere" learning

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

1. Effective and efficient services for learners with special needs
2. Coordinated health and wellness programs
3. A commitment to community and family engagement
4. Career and workforce partnerships

Coordinated and Effective State Support

1. Seamless integration of educational programs from early childhood into adulthood
 2. Adequate and equitable state resources for Maine's schools
 3. Comprehensive integration of technology
 4. A robust and transparent accountability and improvement system
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