In May 2012, the Legislature of the State of Maine passed LD1422 (Proficiency-Based Diploma), a law requiring that in Maine as of 2018 “graduation from a secondary school must be based on student demonstration of proficiency” in all state standards and in Maine’s Guiding Principals—which cover cross-curricular, “21st century” skills such as critical thinking, perseverance, collaboration, etc. Students—and school districts—would be held accountable for their learning, and not just their seat time. This was a big deal: a very focused piece of statute enacted on a very specific point of leverage in a state with a fierce tradition of local control!

Maine’s reforms leading toward a proficiency-based system represent a strong example of a state making systemic changes in order to provide students personalized, deeper learning opportunities.

In one sense, it was the end of a lengthy process that began in 1994 when the Maine legislature passed a law that made the State Board of Education responsible for setting goals for education in Maine. The State Board established a committee to develop learning goals for Maine students, and Maine’s Learning Results: Parameters for Essential Instruction were enacted into law in 1997. These Parameters constituted Maine’s first set of comprehensive, K-12 standards and performance indicators.

In another sense, it was also only the beginning.

When you are devising a policy and taking it on the long march through the policymaking process, the policy can come to feel like the end in itself. “If we can just get this passed, then everything will be okay.” This is a delusion. Possibly a necessary one, but a delusion nonetheless. Policy is important, even necessary, but it is woefully and profoundly insufficient. Without a comprehensive, agile, responsive, organic and adaptive approach to implementation, then the policy itself might as well not exist.

That’s the challenge we’re facing, and here are some ways we’ve addressed it.
concerted system of education will lead to higher levels of learning for all students, and deeper levels of learning for all students. The challenge we’re facing is in helping our districts enact such a change in a way that is not only transformative, but also sustainable.”

—Nancy Perkins
Chair, Maine State Board of Education

Listening Tours

Shortly after his appointment in 2011, then-Commissioner Bowen began a well-documented listening tour of the state’s school districts. One purpose of the tour was to highlight excellent work being done in the field. Another was to gather district concerns. Themes that emerged were concerns about standardized testing requirements, enthusiasm about the Common Core State Standards, a desire for the state to have a “singular guiding vision for education in Maine,” and, of course, shrinking school budgets. Though any of these could have been predicted as probable concerns for the districts of Maine, the listening tour was symbolically and politically very important for forwarding the state’s goal of improving student achievement by moving toward a proficiency-based/learner-centered system. The districts had to be heard.

At the same time, the State Board was collaborating with many education and other groups to carry the conversation forward. These dialogues among the key stakeholders helped maintain the momentum for educational transformation.

Education Evolving

Upon completion of the listening tour, work began on a strategic plan for education in Maine. Consistently, in both the tours and in conversations with legislators and the State Board of Education, the Maine DOE was asked to stop moving from initiative to initiative, to decide on a set of priorities and to stick with them. In February of 2012, Maine DOE announced the release of Education Evolving: Maine’s Plan for Putting Learner’s First. The plan argues that five core priority areas should and would be the focus of the state’s education work in the years following. These five areas, and twenty indicators, are reflected in the graphic on page 45.

The importance of the plan was not just that it clearly stated what the Maine DOE would be focusing on in the coming years, but it also explained why. The plan laid out the case—pedagogical, economic, and moral—for its proposed system of school transformation.

Proficiency-based/learner-centered education is central to the plan. Of the twenty indicators in the graphic, 10 relate directly to proficiency-based/learner-centered education. These include the obvious: rigorous standards and aligned curricula and learner-centered instructional practices. But also others, such as communities of practice designed to foster improvement (absolutely necessary for any systems change), student voice and choice in demonstration of learning (the definition of “learner-centered”), and “anytime, anywhere” learning. All of these are systemic supports or prerequisites to a genuine proficiency-based/learner-centered system. By promoting these—by advocating for them, and making the case for them—the Maine DOE is promoting higher achievement and deeper learning in Maine’s students.

“Center for Best Practice” and “Getting to Proficiency”

Education Evolving called for the creation of a DOE resource, the Center for Best Practice, “with a focus on learner-centered instruction, to serve as a clearinghouse of materials, support and case studies related to learner-centered instructional practices.” The site features five case studies of school districts that have made the shift to proficiency-based/learner-centered practices. The districts have a range of experiences, face a range of challenges, and have been at the journey for a range of times. Poland Regional High School (RSU 16), for example, was the first standards-based high school in Maine, opening its doors in 1999. RSU 20 (Belfast and Searsport) is only adopting proficiency-based policy this year, though Searsport District High School and Troy Howard Middle School, two schools in the district, adopted pro-
The title of that video has become a mantra for our work: “One Conversation at a Time.” It has been our experience, as consultant Judy Enright points out in the video, that the mechanism for the change towards learner-centered work is conversation. How do you change?

One conversation at a time.
We’ve promoted these conversations in a number of ways. The Commissioner’s tours are an example of this. Also, Don Siviski, consultant on proficiency-based practice, has gone on the road to talk with groups of educators all over the state, a sort of proficiency-based/learner-centered circuit rider. At every event, after the presentation, there are educators who need further conversation in order to construct meaning around this profound change. More conversation.

Often, the conversation is already happening, and we’re just eager to participate in it. The Maine Cohort for Customized Learning is a collective of over 25 school districts, enthusiastically pursuing a learner-centered vision. We’re pleased to have a seat at their table to learn from them and to collaborate in their learning.

Occasionally, there’s a conversation that has to happen that we don’t see happening, and so we’ll bring it up. For example, the Proficiency-based Diploma law requires that students graduate when they have demonstrated proficiency in all content areas and in the Guiding Principles. The Guiding Principles are Maine’s expression of what some call “cross-curricular” skills or “21st century” skills. The Principles were an important part of the original work done by the State Board of Education and, recognizing the significance of these skills, the board has continuously supported them since their inception. While the Guiding Principles were first adopted in 1997, however, they’ve never been an explicit, assessed requirement for graduation. The Proficiency-based Diploma law required that the Maine DOE gather a group of practitioners together to develop assessments and assessment criteria around the Guiding Principles in a proficiency-based/learner-centered environment.

Getting to Proficiency

In addition to the Center for Best Practice, the Maine DOE has created a web site, Getting to Proficiency: Helping Maine Graduate Every Student Prepared, which focuses more specifically on helping districts prepare to meet the requirements of the Proficiency-based Diploma law. On this site is an array of resources helping a district to face challenges related to policy, practice, and community engagement. Most importantly, the site links to a self-assessment that districts can take. By answering 98 questions, districts can determine where their energies would be best spent in moving towards a proficiency-based diploma. Just as a proficiency-based/learner-centered system customizes the learning experience for students, the district self-assessment allows districts to customize their own transformation.

To use the language of Ronald Heifetz (Leadership Without Easy Answers, 1997), the shift to genuine learner-centered practice is an adaptive challenge rather than a technical challenge. We aren’t simply adopting a new, more efficient technique to do the same thing we’ve always done; we’re changing what the definition of school is. For many reasons (see Wagner’s The Global Achievement Gap, 2008), the industrial age structure of schools is no longer serving the needs of our society or our kids. It isn’t that our schools are broken. It’s that we need them to do something different than they’ve ever done before: promote high achievement and deeper learning for every student. The challenge facing Maine schools is not in simply figuring out what we ought to do, but how can we do it.

Don Siviski, formerly superintendent of Maine’s Regional School Unit 2, is a consultant for the Maine DOE on standards-based education. Gary Chapin is a Quality Performance Assessment senior associate at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston.

This article had its origins in Mr. Siviski’s presentation on competency-based education at NASBE’s 2013 Annual Conference. Mr. Siviski, in consultation with the Maine State Board of Education, was then asked to contribute this article to the Standard.

The State Board of Education in Maine applauds the ideas expressed in this article about the need for a transformation in how we educate our students. The State Board in its legislated role has played an active, supportive role in the efforts to improve the opportunities for all students to achieve.

Siviski and Chapin rightly conclude that “the challenge facing Maine schools is not in simply figuring out what we ought to do, but how can we do it.” From the State Board’s perspective, the word “we” is very central to the Board’s belief that it will be through the collaboration of all our key stakeholders that “we” will provide for the success of the great work now being undertaken.

—Nancy Perkins, Chair, Maine State Board of Education Deeper Learning Study Group Member