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A Look to the Future : Maine Education Reform

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A Look to the Future: Maine Education Reform

**Submitted to
Commissioner Susan Gendron
Maine Department of Education**

By

**Michael Fullan
and
Nancy Watson**

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Toronto, Ontario

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Introduction

The Maine Department of Education asked Michael Fullan to assist the State of Maine in defining a comprehensive plan for the next phase of reform. Maine has been engaged in a serious reform program for almost a decade, with evidence of considerable progress in implementing a standards-based system intended to ensure high expectations and high achievement. Over the last two or three years, however, the rate of progress slowed. The intent is to review progress to date, identify key challenges and suggest steps for regaining momentum and uniting education stakeholders in a committed push to reach clear and agreed-upon goals.

To foreshadow our recommendations, we believe that there has been an overemphasis on standards and assessment, and a corresponding under-emphasis on teaching and learning, and capacity building—the latter defined as developing the collective effectiveness of schools and districts to raise the bar and close the gap of student learning through improved teaching, focused resources on classroom and school improvement and the mobilization of motivation for sustained, in-depth reform.

Background and Context

With a total population of approximately 1.2 million, Maine has nearly 200,000 students in approximately 800 schools. Enrollment in the school system has been declining slowly but steadily over the past ten years, from a high of 214,000 in 1996-97. The student population of the state is predominantly white, although the figure of 95% in 2004-05 compares with 98% in 1993-94. In other words, although non-white students make up only 5% of the school population, this is more than double the percentage in the early 1990s.

With a strong tradition of local autonomy, Maine has 290 school administrative units or SAUs (comparable to school districts in other jurisdictions), served by 150 superintendents of schools. The system is somewhat complex, with several types of school administrative units, depending on decisions made by individual local communities. SAUs may be community school districts, school administrative districts and SAUs in unions. The SAUs are nested within 16 counties and 9 “superintendent regions.”

Maine has historically been a high-achieving school system, although recent comparative data suggested that this position may be in jeopardy. Regardless of the actual levels of achievement, however, there has been general agreement that the system needed to change if students were to be adequately prepared to take their places in the twenty-first century society and economy, particularly with the decline in employment opportunities in Maine’s traditional occupations such as lumber, agriculture and fishing. A shift to a standards-based system was designed to provide all Maine students with the same opportunities to achieve at high levels, regardless of where they lived.

The State committed to developing high quality standards and in 1997 the Maine Legislature passed *The Maine Learning Results* (MLR). According to this and related

legislation, the State would move from awarding high school diplomas based on credit accumulation to awarding diplomas based on students meeting the content standards of the system of *Learning Results*. Student achievement is to be measured by a combination of State and local assessments (the “Comprehensive Assessment System”), intended to measure progress and ensure accountability.

At the State level, the Maine Education Assessment (MEA) is administered to all students in grades 3-8 in reading and mathematics and to all students in grades 4 and 8 in science and technology. The MEA reports individual student scores as well as whole school performance. In addition, beginning in 2006, all students take the SAT in their third year of high school. The State also participates in the National Assessment of Education Progress, as required by the *No Child Left Behind Act* for all schools receiving Title I funds.

The other component of the Comprehensive Assessment System is the Local Assessment System (LAS). School administrative units were to develop additional assessments to measure achievement of the *Learning Results*. Such assessments might include student portfolios, performances, demonstrations and other records of achievements. Although the Department of Education has provided some technical support to assist SAUs developing and maintaining valid and reliable assessment, the LAS has presented formidable challenges to many SAUs – requirements related to validity and reliability have been difficult to understand and to satisfy, particularly for SAUs with few schools and with limited access to relevant technical expertise.

The Maine Department of Education has produced or commissioned an impressive array of documents related to the education reform program. Some of these are intended to provide guidance to SAUs and schools, in particular technical guidance relating to the development of local assessment systems (e.g. the 2003 LAS Guide: Principles and Criteria for the Adoption of Local Assessment Systems). Other reports (from the Maine Education Policy Research Institute and the University of Maine Center for Research and Evaluation) focus on tracking and learning from experience, demonstrating the Department of Education’s commitment to monitoring the implementation process, listening to educators in the field, and responding with modifications as appropriate. In the fall of 2005, the Department of Education initiated a series of visits to every school administrative unit in the State. Each SAU first completed an extensive self-review of their progress with the Maine *Learning Results* (MLR). Teams composed of Department of Education and SAU members followed up with visits to each SAU, a process that considerably broadened Department of Education staff understanding of local successes and problems.

By 2005 and 2006, considerable progress had been made with the reform agenda; the self-review showed that most SAUs had modified curriculum or adopted new curriculum better matched to the Maine *Learning Results*. Most had also completed the important and time-consuming task of aligning curriculum to the standards. However, the implementation process was slowing; momentum and engagement were fading. The requirements for a local assessment system seemed to be a major contributor to this loss

of momentum. SAUs were to demonstrate that their locally developed assessments met expected standards of validity and reliability, a task that was difficult if not overwhelming for many small administrative units. Throughout the State, teachers and other educators increasingly expressed concern about the time required to develop and implement the local assessment systems; privately many acknowledged that they lacked relevant expertise. The State teachers' union formally requested a moratorium to enable a review of LAS requirements.

When the Governor, strongly committed to education, delivered his State of the State address to the citizens of Maine in 2006, he announced a moratorium on the local assessment component of the system. Rather than a halt to Maine's education reforms, the moratorium was intended as an opportunity to pause, reflect, and engage in a thoughtful investigation and consultation. The challenge is to develop a plan that will re-energize educators, expand capacity, and recommend policy changes to work toward the goal of graduating students in 2010 who meet Maine standards in Language Arts and Mathematics.

The intent is not to consider any radical change in direction, but rather to consider the context and history of the reform effort, to build upon accomplishments to date, and to make recommendations for focusing and re-energizing the initiative and all those engaged in it.

Methodology

The review carried out by the Fullan team encompassed multiple sources of data, including a review of relevant documents, meetings with Maine Department of Education leaders and staff, meetings with representatives of various education stakeholder groups and organizations, and site visits to fifteen SAUs in the State.

The range of documents produced by and for the Department of Education included demographic and achievement data (accessed through the Maine Department of Education website), as well as reports produced by or for the Department of Education, including guidance for SAUs in developing local assessment systems (e.g. *Considering Consistency: Conceptual and Procedural Guidance for Reliability in a Local Assessment System* in 2004 and *Measured Measures: Technical Considerations for Developing a Local Assessment System* in 2000) and reports monitoring implementation of the standards-based agenda (e.g. Harris and Fairman from 2006 *Implementing Standards-Based Education in Maine: Progress, Challenges and Implications* and from 2003 *Report of the Task Force to Review the Status of Implementation of the System of Learning Results*).

In carrying out the consultancy, Dr. Fullan and his team made three site visits to Maine. Two visits focused on data gathering (April 2006 and September 2006), with a final site visit in late November 2006 to summarize our findings and present a draft plan for the next phase of Maine's educational reforms. We then refined and finalized the recommendations based on the helpful feedback we received during the November visit.

The goal of the first site visit in April 2006 was to get a general understanding of the Maine reform, focusing on the context, the key components and the implementation process, from the perspective of key stakeholders in the system. Michael Fullan and Nancy Watson spent two days meeting with State officials, members of the Legislature, and various groups involved with and supportive of public education in Maine (see Appendix A for the schedule of meetings). In addition to presentations and conversations, educators (mainly from SAUs) participated in a workshop session with Dr. Fullan. Participants in the workshop were asked to give written responses concerning (1) what they liked about the current Maine education reforms and (2) what they thought needed attention or improvement. These written responses, from 120 respondents, were a valuable source of information about perceptions of the reform initiative in the spring of 2006.

The second and more intensive site visit took place over the week of September 11, 2006, with site visits to fifteen SAUs. The purpose of the visits was to identify approaches and strategies that SAUs had found useful in implementing the standards-based reform. It is important to note that the SAUs were not chosen at random but rather were selected based on responses to the 2005 SAU review. The review, largely through a self-assessment tool, identified districts that had overcome challenges and improved student achievement. From this group of districts a sub-group of fifteen was selected to represent Maine's geographic and demographic diversity, and to enable all visits to occur in a one-week period. In other words, the assumption was that these SAUs had found ways of making progress and could provide good examples of how Maine educators have addressed the challenges in implementing standards-based education. Although these districts were not meant to be singled out as "models" they were intended to identify strategies that Maine educators themselves saw as useful.

During the week of September 11, Nancy Watson and Nancy Torrance (the research assistant on the project) first met with a group of Department of Education staff, and then traveled separately to SAUs throughout the State. During these site visits, the researcher met with a group, usually the superintendent and principals, and often including teachers in leadership roles. The focus of the SAU meetings was two-fold – first, briefly reviewing the SAU's implementation of the various components of the Maine education reform (with a focus on identifying areas in which the SAU felt they were successful) and second, asking SAUs to identify the strategies they had employed to attain success with specific components of the Maine *Learning Results* (the interview guide for this semi-structured group interview is given in Appendix B). In addition to what people told us in conversation, we were able to access many school or SAU documents, such as examples of high school student portfolios, annual reports and accounts of school transformations. These materials gave further evidence of the progress (and values) of Maine educators. The list of SAUs visited is given in Appendix C.

On November 27, Michael Fullan and Nancy Watson met with Department of Education leaders, including the Commissioner, in Portland, to review our findings and discuss our provisional recommendations. Dr. Fullan also gave a presentation to a group of over 300 educators from across the State. At the end of the session, participants were asked to

write their thoughts on what they had heard and what they wanted the Commissioner to consider, “given the role of The Department of Education to establish policies that yield positive results.” Sixty-five responses, many representing groups or teams, were submitted, supplemented by another twelve responses sent by email. This input from Maine educators was significant in shaping our final recommendations.

What We Heard

In many ways, what we heard in conversations with small groups of Maine educators throughout the week of the site visit, as well as what educators had indicated as successes and concerns during the April workshop session, was consistent with the information in reports and other documents from the Department of Education. Such consistency indicates that the Department of Education’s efforts to monitor progress and identify challenges have been successful in giving an accurate portrayal of the implementation of the Maine *Learning Results* (MLR). The responses of educators at the April session led by Dr. Fullan and the site visits to fifteen SAUs supported the conclusions from the Department of Education’s commissioned surveys, showing that educators in Maine support the standards-based approach but have concerns about how it is being implemented.

Some significant differences emerged, however, between the tenor of responses of participants in the April workshop session and the tenor of the conversations in our site visits to the fifteen SAUs in September. Although the groups agreed with each other in their identification of “successes” and “challenges” related to the Maine reform journey, a more positive picture emerged from the site visits to the SAUs than was found in the workshop responses. Two factors may account for the difference. First, these fifteen SAUs were deliberately selected as examples of districts identifying themselves as having success with the reform work; they were not representative of all SAUs in the State. Second, the discussions during the site visit focused, as intended, more on progress and on successful strategies than on problems. Workshop participants, on the other hand, were simply asked to note “things going well” and “things needing attention,” a format in which individuals are likely to give equal attention to both parts of their responses.

What we heard from Maine educators is reported under six headings or themes. In each case we summarize the gist of what educators reported to us. The summaries are followed by examples of SAU successes that emerged during our September site visits. We also describe the strategies SAUs reported as leading to these successes. Such successful strategies are helpful in suggesting approaches that might be useful beyond individual SAUs, as a basis for lateral capacity building and sharing across the State. It is important to note that the headings or themes are somewhat arbitrary and not exclusive; many comments and practices might fit in more than one category. The themes are:

- Focus on student achievement
- Professional collaboration
- Attention to assessment data
- Resources and workload
- Leadership
- The moratorium

Focus on Student Achievement

We found almost universal agreement that The Maine *Learning Results* (MLR) has led to an increased focus on student achievement. “Increased expectations for student learning” have produced “a belief that all students can meet standards . . . students who graduate with a diploma in Maine should have basic competencies.” Educators now see “less tolerance for excuses” with the “clearly articulated message that ALL students can learn” although one workshop participant observed “I don’t feel that most teachers truly believe all kids can learn—particularly our high school teachers” and another declared “it’s time to accept responsibility rather than cast blame.”

Standards have brought “a consistency of thinking about student achievement based upon agreed upon standards” and “consistency of expectations” with a “focus on school reform that leads to higher achievement for all students” as well as the “move to increase the college-going rate.” Respondents thought that standards helped develop “cohesive messages across the State.” One principal valued the chance to “evaluate programs/practices and to see how they line up across the State.” Respondents spoke about common expectations for same-grade children, making easier the transition experience within and between schools. Others mentioned efforts to improve the transition from elementary to middle to high school. “Local work has brought groups of teachers together . . . [and] has brought consistency of standards within the district.” Representing a number of similar comments, a principal noted the importance of a “common curriculum so that all Maine schools are accountable to the same standards,” thus ensuring the same educational opportunities to children in different parts of the State.

Although educators agree with having a set of common standards as a framework for student learning throughout Maine, they also saw challenges with what often seemed to be “laid-on” standards applied to everyone, suggesting that “too much specificity in content standards (Maine *Learning Results*) can inhibit creativity and deaden classrooms” or that “there is way too much emphasis on ‘failing schools’.”

One principal wanted “recognition that having State standards doesn’t mean 100% of students will attain proficiency at the same rate.” A teacher also argued for more “support with our more challenging students. Meeting their basic needs often gets in the way of teaching and never seems to be valued by those who want accountability in education.” The issue around the meaning of a Maine high school diploma surfaced, with one curriculum coordinator arguing that “we must be ready to be strong and firm [realizing] that some students will need more time and different supports in order to earn one. A high school diploma has become too much of a given and it is hard to let go but we can/should if we believe that it should mean something.”

As we said in the introduction, while the focus on student achievement has been laudable, there must be equal attention to corresponding improvements in classroom teaching. A focus on standards, in other words, does not automatically result in attention to teaching and learning practices. In our work we are finding that the de-privatization of teaching is

the most difficult and important part of accomplishing improvement (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006).

Successful Strategies from SAUs

Many SAUs told us that in the face of a set of standards that could be overwhelming, they had decided to focus primarily on literacy and mathematics. Other subjects were not ignored but until the SAU was satisfied with progress in literacy and mathematics, these would be the areas receiving most attention. At least one SAU reported that the focus on literacy and mathematics preceded the Maine Learning Results (MLR); introduction of the standards was not seen as a reason to shift this focus.

In several SAUs, substantial changes were made to the way special education was defined and delivered. Most changes strengthened the sense of responsibility of all teachers in the school, not just special education teachers. Many SAUs reduced the use of withdrawal programs, keeping children in regular classes, often with special education teachers in the room, to ensure that all children could benefit from exposure to the regular curriculum. One SAU concentrated efforts on identifying children falling below the 50th percentile in reading, language or mathematics. Whether or not such students were identified as “special education,” a personalized learning plan, with regular monitoring, was designed to ensure interventions that would improve achievement.

Successful SAUs are emphasizing actual teaching and learning instead of assuming that this will automatically follow from a focus on standards. We agree, however, with educators who noted that emphasizing standards for all subjects can be overwhelming. We recommend that literacy and numeracy receive special attention on the grounds that if you get these two priorities right a lot of other things will fall into place (Fullan, 2006a). As noted, many SAUs have already made the decision to prioritize these areas.

Professional Collaboration

Although developing professional learning communities does not seem to have been an explicit goal for the State, our discussions revealed that, in many SAUs implementing the standards agenda and LAS, educators have been deeply engaged in ongoing professional conversations, to the benefit of educators and students. “We were able to create (or even require) shared inquiry, conversation and involvement and begin the journey from classroom isolation to professional learning communities. . . . the conversation was extremely important,” said one curriculum coordinator, reflecting many other similar comments. “The LAS work has provided opportunities to discuss quality work, i.e. what it is and how to get students to produce it,” said another. A typical comment from a principal was “this work is forcing us to work together, hold discussions, and grade-level and content meetings.” With 30 years experience within the Maine educational system, another noted that the reforms have “focused our district more than ever before, beginning with developing an understanding of our State standards, causing many conversations (and even battles) about alignment with the actual curriculum and how we prepare students for assessments.”

The journey was not always smooth: “My department is working cooperatively toward common ends, although reluctantly. . . . The common time spent has been collegial and civil—but not unresented. In three years, if we can sustain the momentum, we will be a

professional learning community.” In other words, even conversations experienced as “forced” were valuable for professional learning, showing the value of positive pressure.

As would be expected, schools and SAUs are at different points in developing a culture for professional conversation and collaboration. Increasingly educators acknowledge collaboration as good practice, even if they are not yet in organizations where such collaboration is taking place. We heard that “it is beginning to take hold in many schools and is well underway and flourishing in others. In a few schools, this culture is beginning to have effects in classroom practice.”

We reinforce the need to focus more explicitly on the development of professional learning communities as a means of highlighting attention to teaching and learning and corresponding capacity building (see especially Dufour et al, 2006, and also Fullan, 2006b).

Successful Strategies from SAUs

Our site visits revealed numerous examples of growing professional collaboration and its positive impact on teaching and learning. One SAU began holding annual leadership retreats each summer, as part of intensive systematic efforts to foster distributed leadership, in which responsibility is broadly shared rather than being concentrated in formal leaders. We commonly (and almost universally) heard that one of the biggest benefits of the Maine *Learning Results* (MLR) was that teachers were forced to have conversations with each other that focused on professional issues. Through such discussions, common language and consistency of expectations emerged, with exposure to the thinking and practices of teachers in the same and other grade levels. Teachers increased their understanding of what went on in the grades above and below their own, and inevitably grade levels within a school became increasingly aligned. The most productive conversations concentrated on teaching practices that produce results, rather than more general sharing of experiences.

One SAU spoke of building a “culture of study groups.” For example, the literacy specialist acted as a resource for a team of teachers in a study group aligned with their specific professional interests. The discussion is intended to inform practice and lead to improved literacy instruction; early outcomes are encouraging.

Attention to Assessment Data

Maine educators, be they teachers, principals or superintendents, generally support the shift to “data-driven decision making.” A university-based consultant spoke positively about the “Commissioner’s leadership toward having a Local Assessment System (LAS) that is more focused on using assessment to improve instruction,” and numerous other respondents were also pleased with the “emphasis on data to drive curriculum,” and “assessment as connected to instructional practices.” “Because of the focus on assessments, Maine *Learning Results* forced all schools to examine their learning so teachers are more focused on doing a better job teaching,” reported a school board member. A curriculum administrator observed that “because we had teachers design the common assessments in our system there is more consistency from teacher to teacher,”

while another valued the “common language across the State about assessment.” Schools are collecting “more diverse data about student achievement,” reported one curriculum coordinator, and there is now a “focus on learning rather than teaching,” said another.

One principal agreed that “a common assessment plan within each grade level . . . is proper. Each child in Grade 4 at my school should have the same information available to them.” Another recognized the importance of looking at “data and reflecting on practices and making needed changes to meet the needs of our students.” The rewriting of curriculum based on curriculum evaluation has resulted in “less repeating of the same units so that ‘dinosaurs’ are not taught in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades,” reported one elementary teacher. A principal noted the “increased awareness of parents and community of how the school is performing and how their individual student ‘meets’ the standard.” A curriculum coordinator observed that schools are “now making data-driven decisions and beginning to more specifically communicate with parents about student progress in these terms.”

“Common assessments in reading, numeracy, and writing have improved instruction,” said one respondent while another enjoyed the actual work “with colleagues . . . in developing common assessments.” A number of superintendents noted their satisfaction with the emphasis on the core curriculum of literacy and numeracy. A few principals talked about the push to close the achievement gap. “We have developed assessment literacy and have a strategic plan to focus on instruction to raise the bar and decrease differences in achievement,” observed one, and another confirmed that in his/her school the “standards-based environment is forcing teachers to focus on learning . . . and to start limiting instructional/assessment techniques that do not attend to student achievement.”

Although Maine educators generally support accountability and greater use of assessment data, many expressed frustration with assessment and accountability “taking over the agenda.” The number, impact, purpose, types, reliability and turn-around time of assessments came under fire. Many respondents were concerned about a “following the rules” stance: “Maine has become over-focused on the technical considerations connected to assessment. . . . Our goal for assessment has turned into whether or not we have a local assessment to cover a standard. The emphasis is compliance not student growth and learning.” Many felt that “so much assessment has taken the joy, the art out of being a classroom teacher.”

Respondents were in general agreement about what ought to be happening next:

- “There is an increasing need to shift the focus from accountability to instructional improvement.”
- “Assessments must be looked at as a means of improving instruction not just as another thing to do.”
- “We need to really use data to inform practice.”

Again, we suggest that there should be a smaller number of core priorities, and that the link from assessment to *instruction* needs more pronounced attention.

Successful Strategies from SAUs

Our site visits revealed consensus about the value of using data to support teaching and learning, with most of the SAUs we visited indicating that they were making good progress with the challenge. At the same time, however, people report being “swamped by data” with a lack of time to analyze and use much of the information. One response has been to reduce the number of assessments to include only as many as can be “followed from beginning to end,” that is, to the point of making modifications based on the information revealed in the assessment data. SAUs reported that such “trimming” of assessments allowed teachers to make more effective use of data and actually teach differently because of the information that was available.

A common challenge has been finding and using a satisfactory data management system; a system being developed by the State (MEDMS) Maine Education Data Management System, was seen by most of our informants as problematic. Working on their own, SAUs investigated, decided upon and sometimes modified various systems to manage student data. One unintended consequence is that making wide comparisons becomes difficult when SAUs are using very different systems.

Participating in a partnership or consortium was a strategy for many SAUs to develop more capacity around assessment and use of data. Access to technical expertise was facilitated when SAUs joined together with universities or other assessment centers. For example, one assessment cooperative provided help with developing assessment tasks and also provided professional development to teachers. The Department of Education had provided some sample assessment tasks but SAUs reported that these varied in quality and fit. It appeared that there were some misconceptions around issues of reliability and validity in the development of assessment tasks, for instance, what were requirements for student portfolios, local assessment systems, classroom assessment and so on.

At least a few SAUs developed a new position of data/assessment manager to strengthen the district’s capacity to use assessment data. Others accessed technical expertise through connections with universities or other providers. It bears repeating that any improvement in assessment must be in the service of specific instructional changes. In other words, if assessment data does not lead to modifications in teaching content or teaching strategies, the value is limited.

Resources and Workload

Summing up the feeling of numerous participants directly involved in schools including principals, teachers, and curriculum coordinators, one school board chair complained that “the State is not supporting districts’ efforts to align and assess curriculum with time or money. The mandates are overwhelming in terms of time – particularly teachers’ time – and there seems to be no consideration as to how to accomplish this work within the established framework.” One superintendent noted that the “Department of Education hasn’t prioritized its initiatives and continually embarks upon the next best thing leaving those of us in the field wondering just how much more can we do.”

Teachers, in particular, pleaded to “be able to do more with less paperwork and demands on teacher time,” pointing out that they “are bearing the burden of creating, revising, scoring, analyzing the assessments, leaving little time for developing professional learning communities around instruction.” Because of constant change and heavier workloads, reported a school board member, “teacher morale is low.” One teacher argued that “we have too much negative energy – it seems we spin our wheels and get nowhere and we need time to work together.” A particularly discouraged educator observed that “the sharing of the workload is a cause for concern. Twenty percent of my department is simply incompetent, twenty percent is stubborn, and twenty percent is inexperienced and too preoccupied to work independently, leaving the bulk of the work for the remaining 40 percent who are tired. Administration has no capacity to fix the problem at this time.”

Principals mentioned the “lack of professional development time with the result that teachers are feeling frustrated”; “a process which consumes inordinate amounts of time and visceral energy”; and, “overload, unfunded mandates, too much – too fast, and a lack of direction.” Teachers shared the concern over the lack of professional development opportunities and at least one argued that teachers “need to be validated, heard and respected.” A superintendent agreed that professional development centering around teaching in a standards-based environment has not been widely available to educators” continuing that “many schools in the southern part of the State have more access to learning centers which use/teach effective practices in pedagogy [not available in other regions of the State].”

Another respondent also commented on the lack of equal financial resources to back up reform efforts throughout the State: “State mandates [are] not backed up financially – smaller districts have difficulty funding – while trying to maintain a good educational base within the district.” Several superintendents echoed this concern over disparities within the State, agreeing that “access to State resources is unevenly shared.” Many initiatives receive additional support through grant funding, but again the capacity to apply for and administer grants is unevenly spread throughout the State, with very small districts at a disadvantage compared to their larger counterparts. Applying for grants is labor intensive and is best done with the assistance of a skilled grant writer. The use of consortia and partnerships, with SAUs combining their efforts, has been one effective strategy for accessing such additional resources, sharing expertise and adding to the capacity of member SAUs.

Successful Strategies from SAUs

SAUs have developed an impressive range of strategies for making more effective use of limited resources. One group of neighboring districts reorganized their staff development days so teachers from several districts could take advantage of professional development opportunities. In addition to sharing the costs of external experts, this approach fostered collaboration and lateral capacity building across districts, as teachers and principals developed a common language and shared best practice.

Throughout our visits, we frequently heard about consortia, partnerships, alliances and other collaborative efforts related to curriculum, assessment and school improvement. However, with rare exceptions, these did not seem to play a prominent role in the work of individual SAUs. The strategy of joining forces across small districts has such potential for building capacity and stimulating progress that we wondered why collaborative initiatives do not have a higher profile.

Efforts to manage workload have included narrowing the focus of both instruction and assessment initiatives, for instance, emphasizing the key areas of literacy and mathematics. In some SAUs, a teacher's time might be freed up to take on more responsibilities for assessment or professional development. Schools and SAUs have often reorganized timetables to provide common meeting times for grade-level or vertical teams.

Although not done for workload reasons, the development of common curricula and common assessments will almost invariably help reduce overwhelming workloads. Teachers generally do not have sufficient time to develop their own curricula and all their own assessment materials, and it is unreasonable to expect them to do this. Collective efforts bring benefits to both teachers and students.

In general, our discussions suggested that workload issues have not been fully addressed or resolved.

Leadership

Leadership, at all levels, is always important in large scale reform. With regard to State leadership, SAU personnel spoke highly of the Commissioner and many of the Department of Education individual staff. Throughout our inquiry, however, we frequently heard that, from the perspective of SAUs, messages and directions from the State have been inconsistent and often unhelpful. Although superintendents and some of their colleagues acknowledge that the Department of Education is not an autonomous body, they point to a lack of consistent messages and a lack of coherence in what comes from the State to SAUs and schools. The "lack of direction by the Department of Education, Maine Legislature and the Governor could mean the goal of a common student experience throughout Maine is not attained." SAUs acknowledge that the State has provided various forms of guidance but from the field point of view, "information from the State – models, examples, rules, etc. – is too slow, too vague, too inconsistent."

The following quotes give some flavor of responses:

- "Not only are districts unclear about State requirements, but the public is not informed about changes quite possibly because schools are not sure what to say because requirements are constantly changing."
- "Procedures were made up in mid-stream" with "too much directionless assessment."
- "The Department of Education has not the capacity to provide needed professional development or leadership."

In our own work we have emphasized the need for tri-level development; within and across the school and community as the first level, the district as the mid-part of the tri, and the State as the third level. The idea is to achieve “permeable connectivity” within and across the levels with lots of two-way mutual communication and influence (Fullan, 2006a).

Successful Strategies from SAUs

In our site visits, it became clear that superintendents played a key role in moving the standards agenda forward. However, this was less because of individual action and more due to their success at engaging and mobilizing others, providing working environments in which principals and teachers were supported in their efforts to improve student learning. Superintendents helped to minimize external distractors that threatened to divert teachers or schools from the focus on student learning and engagement. In a variety of ways, they worked to build the capacity of the SAU and the schools within it, providing access to resources and knowledge. In many of the SAUs, strong leadership teams shared the responsibility for all aspects of educational improvement, with principals and teachers taking leading roles. In one SAU, for instance, a recently appointed curriculum director was acknowledged by colleagues as having been the driving force behind the development of curriculum and assessment systems that allowed the district to move beyond an early “stall” with the implementation of MLR.

One of the potential advantages of very small SAUs is that with limited staff and limited resources, teachers have more opportunities to take on leadership roles, particularly in terms of curriculum. One SAU pointed out that with no curriculum coordinator/director, teachers took on that role for particular subjects, a role that included training other teachers across the SAU.

The Moratorium

Responses to the Local Assessment System (LAS) moratorium were varied. Some SAUs saw a useful pause for rethinking LAS development (“slowing the process to build capacity”) and reflecting on what’s working and what’s not. Others, however, were dismayed at a “State turnaround that allowed local dissenters to say ‘I told you so.’” “One initial difficulty was a perception on the part of some SAUs and schools that all assessment had to stop, a misconception clarified by a memorandum from the Commissioner pointing out that the moratorium applied only to work on LAS to meet requirements, not assessment used in the regular instructional process. Nonetheless, some SAUs continued to express concern about losing valuable time and momentum. “Some districts (like mine) invested a lot in LAS and started to change the culture, re: standards and expectations. However, we’re losing ground gained every day that there’s no longer follow through on graduation requirements.”

In our view the moratorium was best used to refocus the effort on a smaller number of priorities, shifting attention to teaching and learning practices as the means to achieving greater standards; many of the SAUs on our September site visit were able to use the moratorium in such a manner.

Successful Strategies from SAUs

In our SAU visits in September, it seemed that some of the confusion had been resolved, although it may be that we were speaking with SAUs who had worked out how to use the moratorium to advantage. Most of the SAUs we visited indicated that “the State’s message had to be reinterpreted.” It appears that these SAU leaders went ahead and did this “reinterpretation” to head off confusion among teachers and to avoid loss of momentum.

Several SAUs reported that the moratorium was an opportunity for refinement of their assessments. For instance, teachers were directed to continue with assessments they thought were useful but discontinue those that were not informing teacher practice. One SAU is focusing on 3rd Grade, looking at “how many assessments, what they are, what can we do to slim down.” The district leadership team is spending time in schools talking to teachers and then making appropriate changes. As well, a survey of teachers will produce further data about attitudes and practices related to student assessment.

Challenges

When Maine educators talked with us, they recounted their stories of progress, success and challenge. They also identified what we see as current “hot-button” issues facing the Department of Education and the education community – mostly focused on questions about revising Maine Learning Results (MLR), the existence and nature of Local Assessment Systems, the recently declared moratorium, curriculum and graduation requirements. On the basis of the data we collected and reviewed, viewed through the lens of what we have learned about what is necessary for sustainable large-scale improvement, we have identified three challenges for Maine educators and their communities they go beyond the specific decisions that educators feel need to be made. Although our framing is slightly different, these challenges could be seen as the “umbrella challenges” that SAUs and others in the educational community identified and discussed with us. These larger challenges are: focusing more on capacity building; maintaining local autonomy but with greater commitment to a common vision; and defining and articulating the role of the State Department of Education.

Capacity Building

As we repeatedly have pointed out, accountability and capacity building are two necessary pillars for successful educational reform. As is true for many other jurisdictions, however, Maine’s reform efforts have been heavy on accountability and light on capacity building. The Maine *Learning Results* and the requirement for Local Assessment Systems in all SAUs in the State were intended as the main levers for improvement. Although this form of accountability focuses attention on results, it does little to build capacity on a systematic and sustained basis. The assumption underlying the accountability approach is that schools and school systems will improve once standards and assessments are in place. Without strong and sustained attention to building capacity, however, improvements are likely to be modest and unsustainable. Teachers and principals are usually doing as much as they can with the knowledge, skill and resources they have; for substantial and sustained gains in student achievement, new

capacities need to be developed. Let us repeat that capacity building shifts attention to teaching and learning and to professional learning communities as a *means* of achieving better learning outcomes.

It is clear from the Department of Education's own surveys that many educators in Maine are discouraged and demoralized by what they see as over-emphasis on assessment for accountability purposes. The intent of the moratorium was to provide an opportunity to rethink the development and implementation of Local Assessment System (LAS). Maine is now in a position to reposition its efforts to ensure a better balance, statewide, between assessment and capacity building.

This is not to say that capacity building and professional development have been ignored, just that they have received comparatively less attention. The Department of Education provided technical support and workshops on various aspects of the reforms, while professional development has been available through groupings such as the Southern Maine Partnership, as well as organizations such as the Mitchell Institute. The limitation, however, is that high quality professional development, focused on linking instructional strategies to needs identified through assessment data, has not been available to all SAUs. In some cases, much of the professional development has focused on the development of local assessment systems and useful learning has resulted from such programs. A more direct impact on student achievement, however, would come from professional development focused on assessment literacy more broadly defined – how to improve regular classroom assessment, how to use ongoing classroom assessment data to diagnose learning needs, and how to change instruction to address those specific learning gaps. Although some of the fifteen SAUs we visited had made considerable progress with this kind of capacity building, based on the evidence, it is not yet widespread. During our site visits, we often noted a lack of precision when SAUs were describing the strategies they used to attain success (although this difficulty could also have been due to the format of the visits). Moreover, professional development is not the same as developing *professional learning communities* within schools and districts—the latter involves changing school and district cultures which is more fundamental than just improving workshops and training sessions.

The partnerships, consortia, and other collaborative groupings that have been operating in Maine have been and continue to be a strong source of professional development. Our sense is that the efforts of this disparate collection of organizations are not connected in any systematic way to clearly articulated priorities, although SAUs would contribute to decisions about offerings of their own collaboratives. If it were possible to tailor the efforts of these organizations to provide a more coherent and systemic focus on lateral capacity building to improve student learning across the State, the collective capacity of the system would increase dramatically. One possibility would be for the State to provide resources for professional development programs that meet certain specified criteria, with the individual organizations free to develop programs within those frameworks. We also suggest that the emphasis go beyond professional development into changing cultures of schools and districts. One strategy that we have found

particularly effective is “lateral capacity building” in which schools and districts receive money to learn from each other with respect to given priorities (Fullan, 2006).

Balancing Local Autonomy with Common Vision

As was repeatedly stressed in all our meetings and interviews in Maine, local autonomy is a strongly held value in the State. This commitment is demonstrated through the continued existence of nearly 300 SAUs or districts to serve approximately two hundred thousand students.¹ Small SAUs can be tightly connected to their communities, with citizens able to demonstrate on an ongoing basis the commitment to their local schools, while the school system is able to adjust to address specific or unique local needs. In our SAU site visits, people generally told us that the current size of their school district or SAU was “just right.” They often went on to suggest that larger schools and districts would mean de-personalized learning and a lack of connection among students, teachers and administrators, a concern that would not seem to be borne out by empirical evidence, certainly for districts of only a few thousand students.²

There is no question that for many SAUs and schools, the current balance between State and local control is working reasonably well. We heard about the importance of local context in interpreting State expectations: “What we’re doing locally—developing capacity, collegiality, collaboration is important. We have been provoked by external pressure to review our local situation critically.” Educators liked the “common curriculum with room for individual style in implementation.”

Maine, notwithstanding its sometimes fierce attachment to local autonomy, has also already recognized the value of sharing, partnership and collaboration within regions and across the State. There are still costs, however, to having and supporting a large number of small districts. The economic costs of continuing to support over two hundred SAUs have been detailed in the recent report from the Brookings Institution. But the educational implications are also a concern; we see some evidence of fragmentation and lack of coherence in educational efforts across the State. Although Maine *Learning Results* (MLR) and the use of the Maine Education Assessment (MEA) have led to greater consistency, there still seems to be considerable variation, with a low degree of alignment of efforts state-wide.

On the evidence of the Department of Education monitoring surveys, many SAUs are finding it difficult to handle all the challenges of standards-based reform and, in particular, to develop a local assessment system to provide high quality data that educators use to improve instruction. Although many small SAUs have been successful in implementing Maine *Learning Results* (MLR), building the necessary critical mass of

¹ By way of comparison, Ontario has 72 school districts (plus 33 “school authorities”) to serve slightly over two million students.

² Although there is considerable evidence of the value of “small” schools, many of the schools in Maine could be considerably larger and still be categorized as “small.” We are not aware of any evidence that larger districts (at least up to districts of approximately 50,000 students) are unable to build commitment, with strong collaborative working relationships.

expertise and momentum can be difficult. With small numbers of staff, everyone has to be involved, which increases engagement but can lead to burnout when teachers and principals are covering multiple roles and find themselves stretched too thin. When SAUs develop their own curricula and assessment, the lack of comparability and a common language across districts limits the ability of educators to discuss across districts in what one of our respondents termed “a useful, change-provoking way.” Questions also arise about effective and efficient use of resources; the recent Brookings Institution study pointed to the costs of having so many separate administrative systems.

In our view, the challenge is to acknowledge frankly the difficulties in continuing to support such large numbers of small SAUs and to recognize that conceptions of local autonomy may need to be updated in the face of current challenges and opportunities. In our site visits we saw many ways in which SAUs were expanding their capacity by connecting more closely with other SAUs or with outside groups. At the moment, however, such efforts seem somewhat ad hoc, with no state-wide framework to guide and foster professional sharing, exchange and joint work. We believe that small units in particular would benefit from a more systematic approach to joint work with other SAUs. Such collaborative efforts might, for instance, focus on professional development around assessment for learning, with concrete examples, embedded in a practical but conceptually powerful framework. Although we recognize that any suggestion of merging some smaller SAUs is highly controversial, such alternatives should be considered carefully, moving beyond unduly narrow concepts of local control.

Perhaps even more critical than the number of districts is the issue of how units within the State relate to each other and to the Department of Education. As we suggested above it is necessary to strive for “tri-level development” across local and State lines, aiming at permeable connectivity. Stated another way, all large scale reform faces the “too-tight/too-loose” dilemma. Too much prescription from the center tightens things up but does not foster local ownership. Too much local autonomy fails to provide the press for forward movement. Permeable connectivity works continually on keeping the too-tight/too-loose dilemma in dynamic tension.

Role of Department of Education

In a State with such a strong commitment to local autonomy, the appropriate role for the State is difficult to agree upon and to enact. With adoption of the MLR, the implied role for the State was to set the standards and let each community decide how to meet them, with responsibility for developing curriculum and assessment. In this model, the Legislature makes the major decisions, with the Department of Education responsible for implementation. The Department of Education operates within the constraints established by Legislative decisions, which may not always be recognized by educators in the field. The Department was downsized about 10 years ago; the Department of Education now faces staff and resource challenges in responding to SAU requests or needs. The SAU reviews in 2005, in which each district was visited by teams with Department of Education and field members, were an opportunity for Department staff to become more aware of the successes and challenges of SAUs but it is not clear whether or how such Department of Education-field interaction will continue. Any discussion of

the future needs to recognize the limited resources at the central level; the State cannot do everything so it is even more critical to do the most important things and to do those well.

In working out what the role of the State could and should be, an additional complication is that SAUs are at very different points along the reform journey. Many have limited capacity to undertake full implementation of MLR, while others, often with the benefit of a highly effective leadership team and access to a range of resources, have developed highly successful schools and school systems that represent the best of a standards-based approach. Whereas one group is crying out for support and guidance from the State, the other group is strongly resisting any outside “interference.” Any rethinking of the role of the Department of Education has to accommodate to these different levels of need. We are reminded of the policy in England of “intervention in inverse proportion to success,” an unwieldy but perhaps useful guide. One possibility would be for the State to make available, perhaps through contracting with SAUs that are further advanced on the “reform journey,” more examples and templates that give concrete guidance to SAUs and schools needing assistance.

Although the State cannot do everything, it can do things to ensure that what is done locally is done better. Our best suggestion with respect to the role of the State is that they concentrate on “capacity building with a focus on results.” And we again stress the importance of “tri-level development” and permeable connectivity; the State can take the lead but educational partners at the local level have a crucial role to play.

Our Suggestions

Committing to Common Vision and Goals

We have already embedded our main recommendations in the above paragraphs. We recognize the value that Maine places on local autonomy. In a State with a total student population of only 200,000, however, we believe that much could be gained from a stronger emphasis on a common vision and common objectives. Based on our conversations with educators across the State, SAUs already share educational values and beliefs. In all our SAU site visits, we found superintendents, principals and teachers with a strong commitment to student learning, to including all children and young people, and to preparing students for citizenship in the complex world of the 21st century.

In spite of this general agreement and commonality, however, Maine lacks a clearly articulated and compelling vision that all educators can commit to, along with firm and sustained emphasis on a few key priorities that should guide all educators across the State. The Maine *Learning Results* and associated performance indicators can be overwhelming, with over 1300 performance indicators across eight subject areas. Educators are already making judgments about what is most important. The State needs to support schools and SAUs by stating clearly what is most important, by communicating this message across the State, and by staying the course. This is an opportunity to articulate the compelling moral purpose of public education, clearly and briefly, in a form that can engage educators and build commitment.

The first requirement is clarity about key goals. Maine also needs good standards, good data, and instructional strategies to meet the outcomes envisioned in the standards. The State has the standards and the data as preconditions for success. What is needed now is more attention to identifying the most useful and relevant data, and ensuring that teachers can use the instructional strategies to achieve the outcomes envisioned in the standards.

In our meetings with Department of Education staff and the fifteen SAUs, we found that much of the groundwork has been laid. Collaboration within and across schools has already led to much greater consistency and coherence within SAUs. Repeatedly people told us how schools were better able to meet the needs of children with consistency of curriculum and expectations across the district. The strategies that educators are using across the State are more similar than many of them realize. When we asked educators whether the strategies they found to be successful would work in other SAUs, they expressed uncertainty, often citing the unique circumstances of their communities or school systems as reasons why such strategies might not be applicable beyond the one setting. And yet, many of these strategies were very similar to ones reported to us by other SAUs, suggesting that good strategies can and should be more widely shared and more commonly applied. We suggest that with more systematic and serious collaboration across SAUs, educators would find that districts are learning from each other and increasingly taking responsibility for the learning of students not just in their own SAU but across the State.

Taking Action: Next Steps

Our Recommendations for the Future

Our recommendations for action, which have been foreshadowed throughout the report, are directed at the State Department of Education as the agency with the responsibility for “steering” and mobilizing the education community in Maine. We see the following actions as reinforcing and extending directions and successful strategies already undertaken by the Department of Education and by many SAUs.

Recommendation #1

- With the engagement of SAUs, agree on the articulation of a brief, clear and compelling vision, which includes the moral purpose of public education. The vision would be a re-commitment to what is most important, not a new direction.

Recommendation #2

- Establish a few key priorities for The Department of Education and SAUs across the State, with a focus on literacy and numeracy (this would be consistent with what many SAUs have already done). These priorities would guide education improvement work over the next few years. To support the priorities, the Department of Education should minimize potential distractors, for instance, giving lesser weight to some of the plethora of performance indicators, thus ensuring a sharper focus on the key priorities.

Recommendation #3

- Set concrete targets, particularly for literacy and numeracy, to provide common objectives and, over time, solid evidence of progress. Targets could be related to MEA, assuming sufficient alignment with the MLR. We understand that some consideration is being given to adopting NWEA on a state-wide basis, which would support tracking of progress at State and regional levels. Local targets at school or SAU level would be developed collaboratively, not imposed unilaterally by the Department of Education.

Recommendation #4

- Send a clear and consistent message to SAUs about what they are expected to do, specifying the SAU “deliverables” and clarifying what SAUs are accountable for. Such clarity would allow SAUs to determine how best to meet State requirements while retaining enough flexibility to address local needs and preferences. SAUs currently are unsure about a number of State requirements that are in flux or being questioned. Concrete suggestions offered by a number of our respondents included having a state-wide school calendar to ease planning.

Recommendation #5

- Focus explicitly on effective teaching and learning practices, and spread these through professional learning communities (within schools) and lateral capacity building (between schools and between SAUs). Enhancing teaching and learning practices will be fostered by greater clarity about State priorities and by facilitation of networks and other avenues for linking schools and SAUs.

Recommendation #6

- Strengthen partnerships between the Department of Education and regional entities – partnerships that focus on capacity building in schools and SAUs. As part and parcel of regional capacity building, use lateral capacity to build and strengthen collaborative cultures in the field (in and across schools and SAUs), perhaps making more use of existing organizational frameworks such as counties or superintendent regions, as well as educational partnerships or consortia operating in the State.

Recommendation #7

- Work with SAUs and professional development providers to develop a framework for ensuring that all SAUs have access to quality professional development to build skill in classroom assessment and instruction to meet expected outcomes. Such a framework would clarify how professional development should match the key State priorities, identifying skills and areas of focus to be addressed in year-by-year plans. State funding might go to providers agreeing to address current and future priority areas, with some agreement about learning outcomes for educators participating in funded programs. Attention needs to be given to the particular learning needs of beginning teachers, those several years into teaching, and those in mid and late career.

Recommendation #8

- With SAUs and the relevant State and regional organizations, develop a framework for leadership development in Maine, including identifying key skills and knowledge for school and SAU leaders and developing paths for developing leaders. Such a framework would include attention to attracting and retaining high quality school leaders, as well as succession planning to ensure that future leadership needs are met. The Department of Education should facilitate the establishment of forums for superintendents’ professional learning. Such forums would not be vehicles for input from the Department of Education, but rather for superintendents themselves to shape the ongoing learning and support to better address current and future challenges.

Recommendation #9

- Require short, focused SAU improvement plans, linked to State priorities, to help steer improvement aligned to these key priorities. However, we reinforce Reeves’ (2006) recent finding that “the size and prettiness of the planning document is inversely related to the amount and quality of action, and in turn to improvements in student learning. Effective change has a bias for action – learning by reflective doing.

Immediate Decisions for DOE

The recommendations above are intended to accelerate Maine’s development as a high functioning education system, focused more sharply on key priorities and on lateral capacity building. Such a system will capitalize on and enhance the strengths of Maine educators.

For many educators in the field, however, a number of pressing concrete issues also need attention; throughout our inquiry we heard that the Department of Education needs to clarify State requirements and make decisions about future directions. Until such decisions are made, SAUs will continue to be hampered by uncertainty about what is required and how resources should be allocated. Unresolved issues or unfinished tasks include revision of the Maine *Learning Results* and related performance indicators, clarification of the status of the LAS and State assessment systems, and decisions about high school graduation requirements. In all these areas, The Department of Education has acknowledged the difficulties and complications resulting from earlier policy decisions and, in collaboration with its education partners, has been studying options for resolving problems. A last issue is the recurring possibility of reducing the number of SAUs in the State. As we heard from many Maine educators, it is now time for decisions about such questions; SAUs and schools are looking to the Department of Education for clarity about future directions. Although we are not experts on all these areas, we see recent Department of Education investigations and emerging decisions as being consistent with our broad recommendations.

We look briefly at several of these “hot button” issues that need resolution.

Maine Learning Results: we support the recent work by the Department of Education of “streamlining” the standards by identifying areas of high priority for students and

focusing on these key standards. This streamlining means a reduction in the number of performance indicators. The previous lists were overwhelming for teachers and schools, with little or no guidance as to which were the areas of highest priority for student learning. The State will have strong support from the field in re-committing to MLR and the standards-based approach to education; most educators also support the adoption of a more focused and targeted set of standards.

The Local Assessment System: The original rationale for having SAUs develop Local Assessment Systems recognized and respected Maine’s strong commitment to local control. Expecting very small SAUs to develop technically sophisticated assessment systems, however, was unrealistic. As well, with different systems in place across the State, comparing progress and identifying SAUs needing additional support is difficult if not impossible. Our data confirmed that for many schools and SAUs, the technical aspects of assessment were taking priority over the use of assessment data to actually improve teaching. The focus should be on developing educators’ capacity in “assessment for learning” – generating and using data to influence/improve instruction. Many SAUs are already making this shift, developing assessments that support classroom instruction and guide teachers in adapting their teaching to better meet student learning needs.

State Testing (MEA): We also believe that for the State, it is vital to shift from having many unwieldy non-comparable systems to developing a user-friendly state-wide assessment approach, using MEA (and perhaps NWEA) data to track progress toward targets and to identify SAUs and schools needing additional support or capacity building. Such a system, supported by local assessment for learning, provides both accountability and capacity building. It is important, however, that such state-wide testing is not seen as allowing definitive judgments about relative success of schools or SAUs – test scores are only one source of information about how schools and SAUs are performing, and a relatively narrow one at that. SAUs have expressed reasonable concerns about possible over-reliance on MEA and other state-wide data.

The use of SAT for NCLB/AYP: The Department of Education decision that all Maine students would take the SAT was controversial. Our sense from our site visits is that much of the controversy has eased and schools are generally supportive or at least not opposed to the requirement. However, we also heard concerns about the SAT being used in reporting for NCLB and for assessing AYP, presumably because SAT is not an achievement test. We do not know enough about the issue to offer a recommendation – we can only suggest that the Department of Education explore the concern and reach an agreement about how the SAT will be used.

Proposed new graduation requirements: As a key component of the standards-based approach adopted by Maine and articulated through the MLR, high schools were to move away from the Carnegie credit system, eventually adopting a fully standards-based graduation requirement. Schools have adopted the changes somewhat unevenly across the State, with only a few reaching full implementation. Questions have arisen as well about how to address the different rates at which students successfully meet the standards, with some needing only three years while others might need five years. The

emergence of a number of challenges or dilemmas related to the new graduation requirements prompted the establishment of a recent task force. The task force, experienced and knowledgeable about secondary schooling, explored the issues and made proposals. We believe that the Department of Education should now decide how best to reconcile the various views about new graduation requirements, communicate the decisions and move forward. Schools and students need certainty about what will be required and when new requirements will come into operation.

Number of small SAUs: Questions increasingly have been raised about the large number of SAUs in Maine, most recently by the Brookings Institution. As we indicated earlier in the report, our concern is chiefly with the educational implications of continuing to support such a potentially fragmented system, with over two hundred administrative units, many too small to build the collective capacity to handle effectively the multiple diverse challenges facing school systems in the years ahead. Serious steps should be taken to build more coherence, at the very least by giving a higher priority to various forms of partnership and collaborative administrative and professional development systems. We also believe it is time to reconsider the costs and benefits of maintaining the present system. Communities may in the end benefit from having fewer professionally stronger SAUs, in spite of the short term difficulties such changes would entail.

Conclusion

Since the adoption of MLR nearly ten years ago, the Maine education system has made considerable progress in moving towards a standards-based system. Educators are virtually unanimous in concluding that there is more emphasis on student achievement, more attention to and use of data, more professional collaboration, and greater coherence and consistency across the State. In many ways, standards-based reform has been beneficial to both educators and students. Recently, however, concerns have crystallized around a number of issues. Our data gathering, along with studies commissioned by the Department of Education, confirmed that while educators supported standards-based reform in Maine, they were dissatisfied with some aspects of the implementation. Our conclusion is that education reform in Maine has stalled through an overemphasis on standards and assessment – it is now time to reflect, refocus and recommit, with a sharper emphasis on teaching and learning and on lateral capacity building across the State.

No one wants to abandon the commitment to standards-based reform. The Department of Education has given serious consideration to several specific issues causing concern or uncertainty – including high school graduation requirements, the Local Assessment Systems, and the choice and use of state-wide tests. Together with education partners across the State, the Department of Education has investigated alternatives and is now ready to make decisions and move forward on these contentious issues. Such decisions should be communicated to SAUs promptly and thoroughly; SAUs need clarity about key requirements and directions.

Beyond such specific issues, important as they are, we believe it is time to think more broadly about the Maine education system and how it can best meet the challenges of the future. We suggest that The Department of Education and SAUs need to regroup, focus

on a few priorities, link assessment to capacity building, and develop professional learning communities within schools and across schools and districts. And we suggest it is also important to do all this with a close link between local development and State direction and support. The role of the Department of Education is not to direct SAUs and schools. In collaboration with SAUs, however, the Department of Education should set priorities, develop frameworks to ensure that educators develop the skills and knowledge they need, and foster the lateral capacity building across schools and SAUs that will ensure a system that continues to improve year on year.

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Appendix A: Schedule for April Site Visit

Maine Department of Education Michael Fullan Visit

Thursday, April 13, 2006 – Messalonskee High School, Oakland State Capitol Campus, Augusta

11:15-12:45 am	Department of Education Leadership Team and Planning Team Members
1:00-4:00 pm	Superintendents and District Teams
4:30-5:30 pm	Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education
6:00-7:30 pm *	Dinner Meeting with Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs State Board of Education Key Planning Team Members

Friday, April 14, 2006 – State Capitol Campus, Augusta

8:00-8:50 am	Department of Education Staff
9:00-9:50 am	Leadership Representatives from: Maine Education Association Maine Principals' Association Maine School Superintendents' Association Maine School Board Association Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC)
10:00-10:50 am	Learning Results Steering Committee Learning Results Policy Review Committee
11:00-11:50 am	Policy Advisory Committee (PAC)
12:00-12:50 pm	Private Lunch and Processing Time
1:00-1:50 pm	Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)
2:00-2:50 pm *	Alternate Time Slot for: Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs State Board of Education
3:00-3:30 pm	Wrap-up with Department of Education Leadership Team and Planning Team Members

* Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs and the State Board of Education were invited to attend meetings at their pleasure.

Appendix B: Interview Guide for SAU Site Visits

Site visit to Maine: visits to selected districts (School Administrative Units or SAUs)

Review briefly how these SAUs were selected for participation: just note that based on the SAU self-assessment process, this SAU is seen as one that has found good strategies for addressing some of the challenges confronting educators in Maine. What they tell us about their work will help provide accurate local context for Michael Fullan's report and his recommendations for next steps.

1. Begin with brief review of what we know of this SAU – number of schools, students – ask what is most important for us to know and understand about this SAU? (e.g. distinctive population, challenges etc.)
2. What have been the benefits of the Maine focus on standards based education (Maine *Learning Results*)?
3. What have been the main challenges? [possible probes: Lack of clarity, no time, difficulty of accessing technical expertise in small SAUs?
4. What do you feel have been some of this SAU's accomplishments? When you think of things that your SAU has done well, what do you think of? [ask specifically about things that emerge from the self evaluation reports and the Feb 2006 White Paper]. *If needed, probe re developing curriculum, aligning with standards, communicating this to teachers, other?*
5. What accounted for this success? What strategies have you used? Have these strategies been useful in other areas? Any drawbacks/costs? [ask specifically about things that come out of the self evaluation reports and also from the "White Paper" of February 2006.] *ask about PD strategies, linking schools with other schools, connections with university or other assistance, "professional learning communities"*
6. Many of the SAUs in Maine are considerably smaller than school districts elsewhere. How do you think this influences the choice of strategies for implementing standards-based education?
7. What would you suggest to other SAUs? What do you think might be replicable? What is probably not replicable, or at least would depend more on the luck of having various factors come together as they have in your SAU? [how take small successes and go to scale]
8. What about the role of the State? How do they assist in the process or not? [probe re Legislature? And DOE?] What could or should the State do to assist? What is the appropriate role?
9. Anything else we haven't talked about that you think is important?

Appendix C: SAUs Visited in September

Fullan Team SAU Visits
Sept. 11th-Sept. 15th, 2006

<p>Bangor School Dept. 73 Harlow Street, Bangor Supt: Robert (Sandy) Ervin 11 schools – 4,022 students</p>	<p>SAD # 75 50 Republic Ave., Topsham Supt: J. Michael Wilhelm 8 schools – 3,230 students</p>
<p>Easton School Dept. 33 Bangor Rd., Easton Supt: Franklin D. Keenan 2 schools – 223 students</p>	<p>Union # 49/Boothbay-Boothbay Harbor CSD 51 Emery Lane, Boothbay Harbor Supt: Eileen King 4 schools – 877 students</p>
<p>Oak Hill CSD/Union # 44 971 Gardiner Rd., Wales Supt: Susan A. Hodgdon 6 schools – 1,703 students</p>	<p>Union # 98/Mt. Desert CSD 1081 Eagle Lake Rd., Mt. Desert Supt: Robert E. Liebow 7 schools – 1,692 students</p>
<p>SAD # 27 23 W. Main St, Ste 101, Fort Kent Supt: Sandra B. Bernstein 5 schools – 1,108 students</p>	<p>Union # 102 RR 1, Box 12 A, Machias Supt: Scott K. Porter 4 schools – 510 students</p>
<p>SAD # 37 1 Sacarap Road, Harrington Supt: Deborah S. Stewart 6 schools – 814 students</p>	<p>Waterville School Dept. 25 Messalonskee Ave., Waterville Supt: Eric L. Haley 5 schools – 2,001 students</p>
<p>SAD # 47 41 Heath St., Oakland Supt: James C. Morse, Sr., Ed.D. 6 schools – 2,636 students</p>	<p>Yarmouth School Dept. 101 McCartney St., Yarmouth Supt: Kenneth J. Murphy 4 schools – 1,401 students</p>
<p>SAD # 56 6 Mortland Rd., Searsport Supt: Mary A. Szwec 5 schools – 841 students</p>	<p>York School Dept. 469 U.S. Rte. 1, York Supt: Henry R. Scipione 4 schools – 2,109 students</p>
<p>SAD # 58 1401 Rangeley Rd., Phillips Supt: Quenten K. Clark 5 schools – 971 students</p>	