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## Maine's Superintendents' Perceptions of Proficiency-based Education and Proficiency-based Diploma Systems

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A background image of a graduation ceremony with graduates in blue gowns and caps, many of whom are throwing their caps into the air. The scene is outdoors with trees and a clear sky.

**Maine's Superintendents' Perceptions of  
Proficiency-based Education and  
Proficiency-based Diploma Systems**

**Co-Editor: L. J. Papp**

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# **Maine Superintendents' Perceptions of Proficiency-Based Education and Proficiency-Based Diploma Systems**

## **Summary**

For the past six years, school districts across the state of Maine had been in various stages of implementation of a 2012 law that required high schools to certify that a student has achieved proficiency in all areas of the state Learning Results standards in order to receive a diploma. The Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) has conducted annual studies to describe these efforts.

As the deadline for full effect of the law became imminent with the graduating class of 2021, concerns grew over challenges with implementation. In the summer of 2018 the law was amended to make the diploma requirements optional in response to public pressure. Subsequently MEPRI conducted a survey of Maine superintendents in the fall of 2018 to capture an early assessment of the status of the policy in their districts. While districts had not yet made final decisions about whether to pursue the optional proficiency-based diplomas or to revert to traditional credit-based systems, most district leaders were able to make predictions; only 11% replied that it was too soon to speculate. About one quarter of the respondents indicated that they expected their districts to stay with proficiency-based diplomas, 38% expected a return to credit-based graduation requirements, and the remaining 26% chose “other” and described approaches that were a hybrid mix of proficiency-based and credit-based systems. About 90% of respondents felt that the existing diploma requirements in their districts were adequate to prepare graduates for a 2-year college and/or entry-level jobs, and 81% believed graduates were adequately prepared for 4-year colleges.

Superintendents were asked about their level of implementation of several specific practices that have consistently emerged in prior studies. Some of these practices are foundational in standards-based education as they enable teachers to instruct, assess, and report student learning of commonly-shared topics. Implementation of these core strategies was widespread, and those who were using these strategies generally intend to continue them. District leaders also described frequent adoption of key hallmarks of the “proficiency-based education” movement. These include an array of strategies intended to

increase student engagement in their learning and thereby improve achievement. While most adopters of these practices intend to continue them, their rates of implementation and rates of anticipated continuation were lower than for the core standards-based strategies. Most districts that identified that they would opt-out of proficiency-based diplomas still reported that they would continue using many of the strategies they had implemented, and some “opt-in” districts were selectively discontinuing some practices.

District leaders also identified their primary concerns about the shift towards optional proficiency requirements. Overall, about one in three commenters expressed no reservations about the change in policy and celebrated the return to local control. Others expressed concerns that moving back to credit-based requirements would cause backslide on the progress they had made in their schools. They worried about decreased opportunities for students, rising inequities across their district and across the state, a loss of positive momentum for making improvements in general, less attention to individual student needs, a loss of trust in the educational policy system, reduced rigor, and a decrease in supports for school improvement.

When asked about the chief benefits of the optional diploma policy, about one in four respondents identified none. The remaining commenters were glad to have a return to local control and the flexibility it affords to use local judgment about the practices that will work best for their students. They also welcomed the benefit to students with special needs and lower-achieving students that were at risk for not meeting the proficiency-based diploma requirements, with the implication that they would continue to award diplomas to these students. They also anticipated that the revised education and diploma policies in their districts would be more feasible and would reduce conflicts with members of the community that were dissatisfied with the approaches that had been taken under the proficiency-based diploma law.

Lastly, superintendents were provided with an opportunity to make suggestions about the next steps for policymakers. These comments ranged from broad input into overall approaches to very specific policy recommendations, and were targeted at legislators, the Maine Department of Education, or both. All suggestions are represented in Appendix A.

# **Maine Superintendents' Perceptions of Proficiency-Based Education and Proficiency-Based Diploma Systems**

## **Background<sup>1</sup>**

Nationally, over the past few decades, standards-based school reform has taken root as a policy initiative and instructional model. This has advanced the use of learning standards and aligned assessments as a mechanism to bring consistency and clarity to public school curriculum and instruction, with the intention of raising student achievement. The adoption of the Maine Learning Results in 1997 marked Maine's entry into this new era of standards-based reform.

With the May 2012 Legislative passage of L.D.1422, *An Act to Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy*, Maine ramped up its efforts to ensure that students were meeting the expectations outlined in the Learning Results. Maine districts were required to award diplomas only to students who had demonstrated "proficiency," beginning in 2018. Districts were tasked with defining and articulating proficiency benchmarks in eight content areas and the Guiding Principles of the Maine Learning Results, and for awarding diplomas based on demonstration of that proficiency. This represented a significant shift from the established Carnegie Unit based approach taken by most public high schools.

Passage of this law represented an effort to improve learning outcomes for Maine students through a policy that tied together two streams of educational reform - the implementation of learning standards, and the belief in accountability measures. The apparent policy intent was that Maine schools that organized around a clear set of learning standards, and were held accountable to them through the awarding of diploma based on those standards, would enable students to learn at higher levels.

For the past six years, schools across the state of Maine had been in various stages of implementation. MEPRI has conducted annual studies to describe these efforts. Districts adopted a myriad of differing approaches to meet what they understood to be the expectations of a proficiency-based system. The policy attempted to address lagging student achievement, and most school districts have worked diligently to interpret the

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<sup>1</sup> *Contributions to the background section were provided by Barbara Maling, Principal of York Middle School and Doctoral Candidate at the University of Southern Maine*

legislation and develop systems that would benefit students. However, schools also faced implementation difficulties. These prior studies were succinctly summarized in a 2018 MEPRI report of case studies in three high schools (Stump, 2018):

[A]ll case study schools were establishing definitions of proficient, aligning curricula and assessments to common content area standards, and building interventions [for] students struggling to demonstrate proficiency. Although specific practices, approaches and perceptions of this work varied among educators and across schools, diligent effort to create a transparent system that benefitted students was evident in all case study schools. Educators and administrators shared that challenges included uncertainty about state-level rules, defining “proficient,” needing resources to support all students, misalignment with standardized tests, and communication through grading practices. Also, participants in this study indicated that transition to a proficiency-based education system could raise expectations for lower performing students, offer greater professional collaboration, and provide more clarity regarding academic standards. (p. i)

In other words, while practitioners struggled with the complexities of the requirement and did not necessarily agree with all aspects of the law, they were working hard to build systems that would comply and improve learning opportunities for students. However, it was also evident that the emphasis on local decision-making in how to interpret and implement the law was resulting in substantial variation from district to district. This was compounded by challenges and delays in the development of uniform regulatory guidance from the Maine Department of Education; to date, no final rules have been released. This variation included differing understandings of some critical definitions – most notably, “standards” and “proficiency-based education.”

All school districts are expected to base their graduation requirements on the standards in the Maine Learning Results. However, there was a lack of consensus about what this means in practice. The original Learning Results adopted in 1997 delineated eight content areas of academic study. “Content standards” and “performance indicators” were described within each area. Content standards were defined as “broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills that students should acquire” and performance indicators were



“what students should know and be able to do from one level to the next to demonstrate attainment of a content standard” (MDOE, 1997). These content standards and performance indicators were categorized by grade bands of pK-2, 3-4, 5-8, and secondary (9-12). Some performance indicators were also clarified through the addition of concrete examples. The Learning Results were updated in 2007 to reflect updates in state expectations. Then, in 2011, Maine adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in mathematics and English Language Arts as the Learning Results expectations for those content areas. The CCSS delineates “standards” as “the learning goals for what students should know and be able to do at **each grade level** (emphasis added).” The CCSS are organized into strands (sub-categories within the content area, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language for English Language Arts). They are further organized by “anchor standards” and “grade-specific standards” (which are grouped into grades 9-10 and 11-12 for high school). In MEPRI studies during the initial years of implementation it was apparent that districts chose different levels of specificity as the “standards” they were required to follow (content standard, performance indicator, anchor standard, or grade-level standard). Also, some districts chose to select only certain standards (at whatever level of granularity) to incorporate into their minimum requirements, while others built systems to measure student performance in all listed standards. In addition, districts differed in the level of rigor that they considered adequate for a student to earn a high school diploma. Lastly, some districts built diploma expectations using verbatim language from state documents, while others rephrased them into district-specific language (Stump, 2018).

The term “proficiency-based” also meant different things in different districts. In some areas, the term was interpreted to mean the same as “standards-based”—i.e. that teaching and assessment would be based on student performance in specific content expectations, rather than on students’ performance relative to each other. More commonly, the phrase “proficiency-based” was used as shorthand to capture a variety of educational improvement initiatives known variously as proficiency-based, competency-based, mastery-based, or student-centered. Specific strategies popularized in this movement include a 1 to 4 grading scale based on attainment of standards, self-paced learning, assessment of learning habits separately from demonstration of content learning, and

engaging students as participants in decisions about what and how to learn. Districts pursuing some or all of these strategies considered themselves to be “proficiency based” but varied widely in implementation. In addition to creating substantial differences in how districts approached the 2012 law, this lack of a common understanding of key parts of the policy also created challenges for the present survey study, as described below in the methods section.

Significant revisions were made to the diploma policy in 2015 and 2017. Then in July 2018, with the passage of LD1666, *An Act to Ensure the Successful Implementation of Proficiency Based Diplomas*, districts were allowed to choose between a proficiency diploma system or a traditional system. This was essentially a repeal of the mandate, and has raised questions for Maine school districts. It is in this context that this statewide survey was conducted to gather input from superintendents.

## **Methods**

In November 2018, all Maine superintendents were invited to participate in an online survey to provide their perceptions about various policies and practices related to Maine’s proficiency-based diploma legislation. The survey was developed in early fall 2018 after passage of L.D. 1666 and was refined after pilot testing with several stakeholders. The Maine School Superintendent’s Association sent an introductory message to its members announcing the survey and encouraging participation. E-mails were then sent to 157 individuals using the most recent contact information provided in the online Maine Department of Education directory. Messages successfully reached 132 individuals and 93 opened the survey. Several individuals discontinued after the introductory questions resulting in 82 responses with data that could be analyzed, a response rate of 62%. The average time spent completing the survey was 9 minutes.

Of those who responded, 84% lead a school district with grades K-12 and thus oversee diploma awarding. The remaining 16% lead a district that does not award high school diplomas, such as a K-5 or K-8 district whose students attend high school in another district or a town academy. Because implementation of diploma policies varies at different grade levels, some survey items were grade-span specific to allow differentiation of responses.

The respondent pool was roughly representative of Maine's school enrollment population. About 15% of respondents led districts of 249 or fewer students, 27% were from districts with 250 to 999 students, 30% led 999 to 2000 students, and 28% had more than 2000 students enrolled. Seventeen percent were in low-poverty districts (less than 25% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch), 35% were in moderate poverty (26% to 50% FRPL), and 48% were in high poverty districts (more than half of students eligible for FRPL). These, too, approximately mirror state patterns. Respondents represented a wide range of administrator experience levels.

As noted above, some of the language in the survey items did not necessarily have a common meaning for all respondents. Even proponents of proficiency-based education do not share a single common definition of the practices and strategies that it embodies. This was evident in the pilot-testing phase of developing the survey instrument, and resulted in several modifications in the final version. For the purposes of this survey and report, researchers used "standards-based" to refer to practices that are necessary to design instruction and measure student learning against explicit content expectations. The phrase "proficiency-based diploma policy" was used to refer to aspects of the state mandate that students demonstrate attainment of the Maine Learning Results standards in order to graduate from high school. To the extent possible, other policies and practices were referenced by specific description, rather than by using the term "proficiency-based education," due to the lack of a common understanding of the phrase across all districts. While these efforts were made to avoid jargon and use functional descriptions of each strategy, some respondents remained unclear about the meaning of the survey language on some items. This is reflected in comments such as, "I believe there are many assumptions in the questions above," and, "The wording of the questions within this survey make it difficult to answer with 100% certainty. We are in our 5th year of implementation and recognize that this process is forever evolving to meet student needs." Thus the findings should be construed as an approximate rather than a precise gauge of district practices and perceptions.

## Survey Results

### Opting In vs. Opting Out – A Matter of Perspective

The initial survey question attempted to discern how Maine districts are responding to the recently-passed legislation that effectively made proficiency-based diploma systems optional (L.D. 1666). Because the revised statute is all-or-none—districts either choose to award diplomas on the basis of proficiency in all areas of the Maine Learning Results, or not—the survey question provided only three choices: likely to opt into proficiency-based diplomas, likely to opt-out, or undecided/other. However, the item also included a comment box for respondents to provide clarifying details. The nature of the comments made it clear that the question was not so cut-and-dry. Many districts are looking for ways to maintain the spirit of proficiency-based education systems within a credit-based tracking system; it was unclear whether such systems would be considered “opting in” or “opting out” based on current statutory language. Policy clarification, via statutory amendment or regulatory language from the Maine Department of Education, is warranted.

Of the 76 respondents whose districts award high school diplomas, 19 (25%) indicated that “My district is most likely to stay with a proficiency-based diploma system (opt-in).” Twenty-nine districts (38%) indicated that “My district is most likely to opt out of the proficiency-based diploma system and return to a credit-based system.” Eight districts (11%) had not yet made decisions about their diploma systems. Some of these indicated that they were waiting for additional information to help with their decision-making process, with comments such as “I expect the board to address this after the legislature convenes and we find out whether any additional action is going to be taken” and “My School Board may opt out if it is not a state mandate. Major concerns are foreign language content area and the uncertainty of a future proficiency based diploma.”

The remaining 20 (26%) of respondents provided comments that suggested they were pursuing a hybrid or dual approach toward proficiency-based and credit-based diploma policies. Interestingly, superintendents who described similar approaches disagreed with whether to characterize their systems as “opting in” or “opting out.” For example, a respondent commented that “We are realigning our system so that a student's performance on graduation standards will result in awarding of course credit” and defined

that as opting-in. Another similarly stated “My district is building standards requirements into course requirements” and defined that as opting-out. Thus, the actual response patterns on this survey item are not very reliable for assessing how districts are choosing to respond to the recent changes in legislation. However, they did effectively demonstrate that additional clarity is needed. Superintendents are unclear about whether the specific policies their districts are pursuing meet the criteria for proficiency-based diplomas, thus governed by the statutory requirements set forth in Title 20-A Section 4722-A, or traditional credit-based diplomas as outlined in Title 20-A Section 4722.

Furthermore, many of the districts that were unambiguously opting “out” of proficiency-based *diplomas* still intend to pursue practices that are in the spirit of proficiency-based *education*. For example, “We plan on continuing our work towards PBL system implementation, but slowing it down, allowing more time for the changes to be implemented more thoroughly. I like to call our path the ‘Credit based system PLUS.’ ” Thus even districts that are technically opting “out” may still benefit from continued resources for implementing aspects of proficiency-based systems.

### **Perspectives on Adequacy of Graduation Requirements**

A series of feedback questions probed for input on the adequacy of current graduation expectations. For these items, responses from superintendents in K-8 only districts (i.e. those that are not responsible for awarding diplomas) were not statistically different from their K-12 peers, and thus all results are aggregated together. Responses were scaled 1 to 7, with 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=slightly disagree, 5=slightly agree, 6=agree, and 7=strongly agree with 4 used as a neutral point. Items in Table 1 are ranked by level of agreement.

**Table 1. Standards-Based Education, Sorted by Agreement**

Rank	Survey Item	% Slightly to Strongly Agree	Average (Median) Rating	Std. Dev.
1	Students who transfer out of my school district will probably be about as successful in any other Maine district.	91%	5.9 (Agree)	0.9
2	The current graduation requirements in my district are adequate to make sure all graduates (class of 2019) are ready for a 2-year college.	90%	5.8 (Agree)	1.2
3	The current graduation requirements in my district are adequate to make sure all graduates (class of 2019) are ready for an entry-level job.	87%	5.8 (Agree)	1.3
4	The current graduation requirements in my district are adequate to make sure all graduates (class of 2019) are ready for a 4-year college.	81%	5.4 (Agree)	1.3
5	Minimum high school graduation requirements in each district should be left to local control.	53%	4.3 (Slightly agree)	2.0
6	My district's minimum graduation requirements should be more rigorous.	32%	3.2 (Disagree)	1.4
7	Maine's learning expectations (the Maine Learning Results) should be more rigorous.	17%	2.8 (Disagree)	1.1

Overall, there was solid agreement that current high school graduation requirements are adequately rigorous. About 9 out of 10 superintendents felt that the students in their district could be as successful in any other district, and that graduates were prepared for community college or entry-level jobs. Slightly fewer (81%) believed that all their high school graduates were prepared for a 4-year college. Only one in three (32%) believed that their district's graduation requirements should be made more challenging, and less than one in five (17%) believed that the Maine Learning Results were not rigorous enough.

There was mixed agreement with the tenet that minimum high school graduation requirements should be left to local control; only half of superintendents agreed, and the broad standard deviation is an indicator that responses were polarized. About one in five (19%) disagreed strongly with the statement, while one in three (30%) strongly agreed.

## **Implementation of Standards-Based & Proficiency-Based Education Strategies**

Respondents were asked to reflect upon several strategies their districts may have been implementing in the prior school year, before the most recent change in Maine policy to make proficiency-based diplomas optional. These practices were commonly observed in previous studies about the policy implementation. While not explicitly required by statute, some of the items are foundational to a standards-based educational system and implicit in the expectation that districts would measure student proficiency on state standards (items 1, 2, and 6). Other strategies are associated to varying degrees with the proficiency-based educational paradigm (items 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9). The first series of questions (Table 2) asked superintendents to identify practices that their schools were using at each of four grade spans (early elementary, intermediate elementary, middle level, and high school). Using the same list of strategies, the second series (Table 3) asked whether they expected their districts would continue to use those strategies they had been pursuing in the prior year. The first table is thus a depiction of the strategies with the strongest uptake under the proficiency-based diploma law, and the second describes those with the most staying power.

**Table 2. Implementation of Selected Standards-Based and Proficiency-Based Strategies (Sorted by Percent Implementing at One or more Grade Spans in District)**

Q.	In prior studies of Maine's proficiency-based diploma law it was noted that districts varied widely in use of certain educational strategies. For each grade span listed, which of the practices were in the process of being implemented in your district's system last year? Check all that apply. *					
Rank	Item	Grades pK-2	Grades 3-5	Grades 6-8	Grades 9-12**	% Using in One or More Grades
1	Uniform grade-level learning standards and expectations across the district.	90%	90%	88%	82%	<b>94%</b>
2	Progress reports (including report cards) provide information about the student's proficiency level in each grade-level learning standard.	81%	78%	73%	72%	<b>90%</b>
3	Students' work habits are evaluated separately from their mastery of the subject matter.	78%	78%	83%	81%	<b>88%</b>
4	Expectations for student performance on assessment tasks are explicitly communicated (such as with scoring rubrics provided in advance).	57%	69%	79%	72%	<b>84%</b>
5	Report cards use a 4-point (1 to 4) grading scale.***	77%	75%	66%	53%	<b>79%</b>
6	Common district-wide assessment practices for each grade-level learning standard.	68%	66%	58%	53%	<b>71%</b>
7	Students participate in making decisions about their learning (for example, choosing how their knowledge and skills will be assessed).	22%	27%	38%	44%	<b>48%</b>
8	Students do not advance to the next level until they demonstrate an adequate level of proficiency.	29%	27%	26%	29%	<b>42%</b>
9	Students progress through the curriculum at their own pace.	27%	25%	22%	18%	<b>32%</b>

*\*Full survey language included the clarifying statement "Note that most of these strategies were optional under the proficiency-based diploma legislation, and some districts implemented these practices before the change in state law in 2012."*

*\*\* The denominator for grades 9-12 excludes districts that only include grades K-8*

*\*\*\*Note: this practice does not preclude hybrid / dual grading systems*



**Table 3. Retention of Selected Standards-Based and Proficiency-Based Strategies**

Q.	Which of the above practices do you anticipate will remain in your district in the grades where it was implemented? Check all that apply.		
Table 2 Rank	Item	% Implementing at Any Grade Span (Table 2)	% Of All Implementers Continuing
1	Uniform grade-level learning standards and expectations across the district.	94%	96%
2	Progress reports (including report cards) provide information about the student's proficiency level in each grade-level learning standard.	90%	87%
3	Students' work habits are evaluated separately from their mastery of the subject matter.	88%	96%
4	Expectations for student performance on assessment tasks are explicitly communicated (such as with scoring rubrics provided in advance).	84%	91%
5	Report cards use a 4-point (1 to 4) grading scale*	79%	79%
6	Common district-wide assessment practices for each grade-level learning standard.	71%	96%
7	Students participate in making decisions about their learning (for example, choosing how their knowledge and skills will be assessed).	48%	83%
8	Students do not advance to the next level until they demonstrate an adequate level of proficiency.	42%	66%
9	Students progress through the curriculum at their own pace.	32%	72%

*\*Note: this practice does not preclude hybrid / dual grading systems*

A few notes are pertinent for interpreting the results in Table 2 and Table 3. First, it must be acknowledged that the survey attempted to capture information about a broad range of practices and beliefs across multiple grade spans. Yet actual practice is often more complicated and difficult to categorize. For example, while the survey asked about strategies that were “in the process of being implemented” in order to recognize that the law had not yet been fully implemented in 2017-18, schools that were in the early stages of development may or may not have identified themselves as implementers. Alternately, a school district may have had uneven implementation within each grade span, grade level,

or across different schools in the district. This makes it difficult to provide a straightforward “yes or no” response to each item.

In addition, these practices were not explicitly required under the 2012 diploma law. However, as described in prior reports (Stump, 2018), there was broad encouragement of these strategies. Many districts pursued them out of genuine commitment to the principles they represented, but some reported adoption of certain strategies primarily because of a misperception that they were mandatory. This was perhaps most notable for item 5, “Report cards use a 4-point grading scale,” which is a key component of proficiency-based education systems as it unambiguously identifies a student’s performance relative to an expected standard of performance. The purpose of including this item in the survey was to assess the extent to which districts were in the process of adopting this benchmark practice before passage of L.D. 1666. However, the survey did not specify whether districts were using the 1 to 4 scale exclusively or as a complement to a more traditional 0 to 100 (or 0 to 4.0) scale. Thus the results should be interpreted as 79% of districts were using a 4-point scale to communicate proficiency level in some fashion, but not necessarily that they had converted exclusively to that reporting system. Several respondents clarified in their comments that they were using dual or hybrid grading systems. This is one concrete example of how the survey results only partially capture the complexity of implementation of this state policy.

Given those qualifications about the interpretation of the data, the results in Tables 2 and 3 depict broad implementation of the foundational standards-based practices of identifying (item 1), communicating expectations (item 4), and reporting (item 2) based on common learning standards; each of these practices was in the process of implementation in over 80% of responding districts. Common district-wide assessment of learning (item 6) is also a frequent element of standards-based educational systems and was implemented slightly less often at 71% of districts. All of these standards-based practices have been encouraged in Maine policymaking since the adoption of the Maine Learning Results in 1997, and the fact that their use is prevalent is an indication of success. In settings where these practices were employed, superintendents reported a high rate of retention of these strategies in the current academic year—87% or more of adopters were continuing the

practices. Moreover, the retention rates were high across all types of districts, regardless of whether they identified as opting-in or opting-out of proficiency-based diplomas.

Another practice with high implementation at one or more grade levels (88%) and high continuation where implemented (96%) is the separation of feedback on students' work habits from grading on academic proficiency. While arguably not as intrinsic to a standards-based education model as the prior items, this practice has been promoted in recent educational reform efforts. The finding that 96% of implementers were choosing to continue this practice is a strong indication that it has been well-received.

The remaining items (5, 7, 8, and 9) describe practices that have been encouraged as promoting student proficiency. These strategies were implemented less often, and districts' plans to retain them were more variable. While the survey methodology captures leaders' description of prior and current use of these strategies, it is not well-suited for explaining the reasons for higher or lower adoption or retention. Some of these strategies may have been successful, but are being discontinued for logistical or political reasons.

### **Open-Ended Responses**

The final section of the survey posed three open-ended comment questions to allow respondents to provide more descriptive feedback in three areas related to the summer 2018 policy change that made the proficiency-based diplomas optional: potential disadvantages, potential benefits, and general advice for state policymakers.

#### ***Potential Losses from Optional Policy***

In the first open-ended survey item, superintendents were asked to provide feedback to the question "What positive changes or improvements are you concerned will be lost now that the proficiency-based diploma system has become optional?" Seventy-four superintendents provided an answer to this question. Responses were categorized into several distinct themes. Each is listed below along with the number of times the theme emerged and a selected quote(s) that exemplifies the remarks in that category. Each response could contain more than one theme.

- **None** (23 mentions). "No concerns, this will be better." "[W]ith the system we have implemented, having local control will work well for us. Everyone wins." "Nothing, if we are allowed to move forward as a district... The core graduation requirements

that were previously in effect are fine for us, as we can build off that foundation in a way that makes sense (local control).” “None. We are keeping the positive standards and assessment work we completed.”

- **Return to systems that do not adequately measure or communicate student proficiency** (15 mentions). “Systems will return to awarding credits based on grades, which will not necessarily reflect students' levels of proficiency.” “Reverting to “traditional” grading systems and assessment practices means reverting to more arbitrary measures of assessment.” “[S]low down or stop movement toward standard-based grading.” “I’m concerned that teachers will return to more traditional instructional and assessment practices that were NOT necessarily based on achievement of clear standards for students.” “Tracking of standards through the grade levels.”
- **Loss of momentum** (15 mentions). “There is a concern that without leverage, it will be more difficult to complete this [improvement] work.” “Loss of momentum at the HS.” “The majority of schools will return to an outdated and failing educational process.” “Allowing choice could cause a tide of schools to revert back to traditional averaging methods. This might cause some PBE district families to think that it would be easier if all districts stepped back from PBE. The change in legislation is already being referred to as a ‘slow repeal.’” “[T]he fire under peoples feet has been removed.”
- **Less consistency / equity across districts** (10 mentions). “All districts were working toward a similar system with the potential for consistent, and perhaps more equitable, programs.” “I worry with not having a clear state expectation for a minimum at the very least, the inequity of education for the state has risen.” “Good school systems will become better, while underperforming school systems will not. No incentive for underperforming schools to get better.”
- **Less consistency / equity within districts** (9 mentions). “High school students who have six teachers will have six different grading systems.” “There was work underway to have tighter alignment between instructional practice and assessment

based on agreed upon set of learning targets resulting in greater transparency for students and parents. This muddies the water.”

- **Loss of focus on individual students** (8 mentions). “I am very concerned that students will not be given multiple chances to demonstrate proficiency.” “Student centered practices.” “Student choice, pace, and pathways. Lots of work and emphasis on this now all lost.” “We will stop paying as much attention to the needs of individual students.” “There has been an increase in the conversation around the State about what we need to do to reach each student and not simply say the student needs to figure it out.”
- **Initiative fatigue, loss of trust** (7 mentions). “Our ability to demonstrate that we can agree on, thoughtfully plan and implement something and stick with it long enough to evaluate its effectiveness. Collectively, educators are tired and frustrated with the constant cycle of starting and stopping initiatives, and we are losing confidence in the legislature and the department of education.” “Teacher investment in state requirements. We saw this earlier after teachers spent time and effort developing local assessments only to see that requirement change.” “We were at a place of trust with stakeholders, it will now be eroded again.”
- **Loss of rigor** (5 mentions). “Ensuring students are proficient when they graduate high school.” “Some districts will see this as lowering the standards.” “Students will graduate from Maine schools with low levels of proficiency...very sad.” “Rigorous standards for all students.”
- **More vulnerable to pressure to revert to prior practices** (4 mentions). “Now that the State has made the system optional, the districts will be under attack at the local level with disgruntled individuals who do not support the PBE system. In the past, the local schools had the backing/support of the State.” “We are committed to keeping the philosophy and the practice alive but once given the option my board will (I’m afraid) not support a straight proficiency diploma.”
- **Loss of resources to implement PBE** (3 mentions). “Shared professional development opportunities regarding PBE nuts and bolts will be limited.” “Small school systems with limited resources (time and personnel) will not be able to

implement PBD system with fidelity.” “The common professional development discussions across the state and a common goal have been lost.”

### ***Potential Gains from Optional Policy***

The next survey question asked “What benefits do you foresee now that proficiency-based diplomas are optional?” As with the item about potential losses, responses were varied and “none” was again the most common response.

- **None** (19 mentions). “None.” “N/A.” “I really do not see any benefits to an optional law.” “I don't see benefits - this is what is best for students and making it optional is simply stalling the necessary work.”
- **Local control** (15 mentions). “Local control for decision makers.” “The discussion about graduation requirements can continue without political interference.” “Districts/local community can decide what is best for their students.” “The districts who were dragging their feet will not derail the process for the rest of us.” “The community loves that this autonomy was given to schools and is more receptive because they know everything we are doing with standards is our choice.”
- **Flexibility** (10 mentions). “Not all students need to be proficient in all 8 content areas in order to have future success. Now, we have greater flexibility for those students.” “We can work with our staff, students and community to develop a system that works in our district. Now we have freedom to do this right and there is much more buy in.” “Allowing the credit based diploma provides some wiggle room for districts seeking flexibility from the more stringent proficiency model.” “The ability for flexibility in some requirements. We can build something we are proud of and not focus on all content, all standards.”
- **Hybrid models / choose the best of both systems.** (8 mentions). “Hybrid models can be developed, using both credit based and PBE expectations.” “It allows our district to look at how we can blend the two systems into one.” “The benefit I hope to see is the legislature acting to permit using components from both diploma "options" to improve our current PBD system.” “the ability to provide an educational program built using best practices of both 'models.’” “Our students did not like or

see value in a 1-4 grading system without credits. They, and the faculty, petitioned to a change back to credit and grades-based courses.”

- **Benefit to special education and lower achieving students** (7 mentions). “Allow students receiving special education to meet graduation standards and receive a diploma.” “Special education and hard working students who work to the best of their ability.” “For students with special needs it is the right thing to do...Differentiated diplomas should have been allowed from the get go...not having them and stating "all students" meet the requirements turned off people and made the whole movement unrealistic.” “It will allow students to graduate that wouldn't under proficiency based. Don't know if that is good or bad but we have students that would not reach proficiency if we are being honest. One could argue that they shouldn't graduate anyway but I don't think society has the stomach to not graduate 20% of its Seniors.”
- **More realistic / achievable** (7 mentions). “Certification of each student’s progress toward proficiency was burdensome and I'm thankful this requirement was dropped.” “Capacity of small rural system to offer all content areas to a level of proficiency will not be required.” “The law was unrealistic, especially regarding world languages.” “PBD seemed to be an impossible goal... every student proficient in all 8 content areas would have been a major challenge.” “There is less pressure to hire teachers for world language when there is a shortage of these.”
- **Reduce conflicts** (6 mentions). “Lower angst in the community.” “Less conflict with implementation.” “Meet the very clear expectations of our Board and public of certain practices they value and have been non-negotiable.” “Parents may now understand what we are doing.”
- **Slowing down.** (4 mentions). “Systems will have an opportunity to revisit policies and practices to make adjustments based on the information that's been learned over the past few years of assessing and reporting on attainment of standards.” “Allows districts to work at the pace they need to in order to meet district goals that may very well include proficiency based education.” “We can take more time to

implement changes and inform the community about WHY these changes are important rather than rushing through with little explanation.”

### ***Feedback for Policymakers***

The final survey item offered an opportunity for general feedback with the question “What suggestions would you like to share with state-level policymakers?” In order to honor the time that superintendents spent sharing feedback on the survey, all responses are provided in Appendix A. The general themes that surfaced can be briefly summarized as follows:

- Stay the course
- Keep local control / flexibility
- More resources and communication are needed from the Maine Department of Education (including more staff)
- Maintain consistency
- Learn from this. More advance planning was needed.
- Establish uniform minimum expectations for a high school diploma.
- Don’t change the Learning Results
- Listen to practitioners
- Build leadership capacity
- Misc. specific policy recommendations

### **Conclusions & Policy Implications**

The feedback provided from Maine superintendents paints a mixed picture of the perceptions of proficiency-based education and diploma systems. On one hand, only 25% of respondents indicated that they expected their districts to fully opt-in to continue awarding high school diplomas on the basis of proficiency in all eight content areas and the guiding principles of the Maine Learning Results. However, they also reported widespread adoption of key standards-based practices including identification of uniform grade-level learning standards, clear communication of learning expectations on assessments, explicit rating of student proficiency on report cards, and common learning assessments across the



district. A strong majority of those using these standards-based strategies anticipated that their districts would continue using them. While some districts had implemented these strategies prior to the 2012 diploma law, others were encouraged to further develop and improve upon their standards-based systems in response to the mandate. Thus it is likely that the legislation has resulted in lasting positive impacts in some Maine districts.

In addition, many districts reported implementation of proficiency-based educational strategies such as evaluating proficiency separately from work habits, adopting a proficiency-based 1 to 4 grading scale, engaging students in decisions about their learning, and basing the pace and progression of student learning on mastery. While these strategies were not as pervasive, a majority of the implementers were satisfied with their student outcomes and expressed their intent to continue. This may also be interpreted as an effect of the 2012 legislation. Continued study of the impacts in these districts may provide an opportunity to gauge the impacts of these emerging strategies on student learning and college readiness.

Reactions to the 2018 change in policy to make the diploma requirements optional were similarly mixed. In open-ended comments, there was widespread acknowledgement that the increased flexibility and local control would make it easier to develop and maintain systems that worked in each district, and many respondents expressed satisfaction and relief at the change. However, a number of potential downsides were also identified, with proponents fearing a loss of progress. Those that were in favor of proficiency-based diplomas worried about a decrease in rigor and rising inequity, while those that particularly favored the addition of competency-based and student-centered practices were fearful that the progress would be lost without the impetus of the diploma law to promote the changes. Notably, individuals in both camps expressed frustration at the amount of effort and work that was spent in implementing strategies that were no longer required.

The current status of the policy presents an opportunity for policymakers to reflect upon the successes and failures of the initiative. Before considering any further changes, we suggest the following:

- As reported in prior years, some of the confusion around the diploma law stemmed from a lack of a focused and clearly articulated vision for the specific

practices and policies that districts were expected to implement. Most aspects of the state mandate pertained directly to increased accountability for student outcomes. However, the most readily-available implementation supports emphasized specific reform-minded instructional practices as a pathway to improving student achievement. This resulted in confusion about what was required, and districts chose varying paths depending on their own interests and interpretations of the law. This made it difficult to measure progress. It may be valuable for policymakers seeking to make additional revisions to select a more narrowly focused objective(s) so that it is easier to weigh potential policy options based on their likelihood of success.

- School districts invested considerable time and energy into improvement efforts, and many have reported that they wish to continue successful practices that were developed and implemented. Policymakers, including legislators and the Maine Department of Education, may wish to provide resources or incentives to continue to encourage evidence-based strategies that promote student attainment of state learning expectations.
- Although school leaders did provide suggestions for future policy amendments, they are not receptive to any substantive changes in the near future. Any new initiatives should be carefully planned and implemented on a generous timeline.
- One of the primary motivations for the adoption of the 2012 policy was a perception that Maine high school graduates were unprepared for college and careers, as demonstrated in a need for remedial college courses and employer feedback about new hires that lacked critical skills and dispositions. However, superintendents overwhelmingly felt that their current graduation requirements were providing adequate preparation. Nine out of ten believe their graduates are ready for 2-year colleges and entry-level jobs, and eight out of ten felt that their graduates are ready for 4-year colleges. They do not believe that there is a need for more rigorous diploma requirements or state learning standards. This suggests a disconnect between K-12 educational leaders and those who work with their graduates. This lack of superintendent buy-in to a core tenet of the

proficiency-based diploma law should be explored and addressed. A shared understanding of the appropriate level of rigor in a high school diploma is critically important to establish if K-12 practitioners, higher education professionals, and employers are to engage in productive conversations about graduation requirements.

- The move toward an optional proficiency-based diploma policy creates the potential for a natural experiment in which to study the impacts of different practices on student outcomes. We recommend continued monitoring of districts' implementation of key proficiency-based education strategies in order to evaluate whether these practices are related to different patterns of student achievement.

Maine superintendents continue to face challenges in leading educational systems that will prepare our students for the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. Their feedback points to several areas where state policy can help them to be more successful.

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## **Appendix A: “What suggestions would you like to share with state-level policymakers?”**

*(Comments are presented in no particular order)*

- Leave it alone please
- Please set up one state system for graduation requirements and stick to it even when criticized by some.
- Sometimes great ideas can go south if it is NOT thought through in its entirety. Never start anything without considering the outcome.
- When you pass a law requiring a sea change, stay with it and develop the capacity at state and local levels to build a sound system.
- Require all Maine High Schools to provide a learning pathway for all eight content areas but allow the students to identify the content areas they want to focus on. For example, require all students to demonstrate proficiency in ELA, Math, Social Studies and Science and then allow them to choose at least to more content areas in addition. Inclusive of CTE counting as a content area selection. This should preclude any school district from not providing a pathway from proficiency in all content areas.
- Get rid of the term "proficiency" and focus on the term "standards", "achievement of standards." The term "proficiency" was a poison pill that killed good work around student assessment and assessment practices. It didn't help that there were many "experts" in our ranks providing professional development at many state conferences and workshops who really didn't know what they were talking about.
- Requiring proficiency without defining what that means was not a logical foundation upon which to build. Each district tried to sort that out in good faith, but after several years of working to put plans in place, the DOE proposed rules that would have upended many districts' plans. Suggestion: with any such initiative, districts need resources and a clear path to achieve the goal.
- Empowerment over compliance. I spend 70% of my time filling out forms for the DOE when I should be influencing positive change in our buildings. We need a paperwork reduction act!
- Please, please, please - refrain from changing things again, or thinking that more legislation will help. Set a bar with testing (fine), but don't change the game on us as we've put in far too much time. This includes NOT changing the Maine Learning Results. These are good standards for Maine kids. They are agreed upon by a majority of teachers across the state; we know them and have taught to them - and our assessments are aligned to them. Please don't change the Learning Results... Our teachers, principals, and students are poised for success. If you take our eye off the target, we'll miss.
- Develop a Task Force to review and evaluate all the educational mandates in the state. Proclaim a 4 year moratorium on educational mandates to complete the work.
- Please work to ensure that the State of Maine focuses on educational policy that serves the best interests of students and maintains a specific direction rather than implementing multiple new initiatives or reversals of policies. Such changes can

negatively impact students and student achievement and create additional work on the part of our teachers and administrators.

- Look at a blended model option for all similar to Vermont's PBD law.
- The reality is there is a viability issue with the current Maine Learning Results when the expectation of holding all learners to a level of proficiency (if you don't lower the level of the proficiency bar). The expectations need to be reasonable with depth of content not the only focus.
- We have been teaching to the standards for a long time now. It is working to have a credit-based graduation system along with standards based teaching and learning. However, if some systems choose to adopt a proficiency-based diploma, that should be left up to a local decision.
- [Be brave and] stick to what you know is best for kids.
- I have been an educator (teacher, principal, supt, and [consultant]) for 45 years and have seen many MDOE initiatives come and go (local assessment systems, state tests, report cards, etc.). Many of these initiatives have focused on raising the quality of student performance and teacher practice. Each time there is push back ("it's too hard to implement", limited resources, etc.) MDOE and legislators back off. With term limits for legislators, no one sees the big picture over time. Also, the revolving door at MDOE commissioner and limited MDOE personnel also inhibits continuity and support for initiatives for improving student learning and teacher practice.
- That they understand that knowledge acquisition and how you report that are two different things. Continue to push proficiency-based instruction but allow districts to decide how they report what students know and can do to the public.
- Leave this alone. No more back and forth.
- Use a continuous feedback loop with school districts. Consistency in the DOE will develop more collaboration.
- Stop creating initiatives for the local districts to implement.
- Stop any new educational mandate for 4 years. Do not mandate a requirement that all HS students master a foreign language in order to receive a HS diploma. I would guess most legislators do consider themselves to be successful. Perhaps one should ask what educational role mastering a foreign language played in their success.
- Determine which districts are doing PBE right. Visit these districts and showcase their work. Share their policies, grading and reporting practices, and highlight the instructional strategies that support student learning.
- State must take a more active role in leading, positive messaging, building capacity across the state.
- We support a clear set of learning standards that evolve (aka - the Maine Learning Results/Standards) and building the professional capital across the state to drive better results for students.
- Be extremely careful with what goes out to the public. Schools are doing great things...we need to be given time to craft a system that works for us.
- The State has invested money and educators have invested loads of time in learning about and making changes toward a PBE system. Now the money is gone and the statute that gave the work backing is gone. It would be helpful to stay the course and have the DOE and schools work as a team on everything.

- Clarify LD 1666
- Focus on understanding and implementation of CCSS
- Focus on understanding of implementation of high functioning RTI systems in each school
- Provide more teacher/administrator professional development to achieve better use/understanding of NWEA, PSAT, SAT, etc. for improved student achievement
- Provide pre-service teachers course work in tests, measurements, standards-based instructional and assessment practice as a requirement for certification
- Proficiency Based standards have been proposed for quite some time now, more because it makes some politician look like he/she a) knows something about public education and b) they are doing something about it. The bottom line is that state will never be able to implement PBD until it understands the cost both in financial investment and the percentage of students that will not receive a diploma. It's time for someone to be at the helm in the DOE that understands today's public education issues and is willing to speak up even in opposition to the governor if need be. Public Schools today are not your mother's experiences and it time we start a campaign to enlighten the general public about this issues we are dealing with. Stop changing expectations every 4-6 years and allow districts to fully invest and implement new methods so students' achievement will grow. Public schools will never see progress until we can focus our work and know that it will not be undone the day we complete it.
- Take politics out of decisions about education. Education is something we should all be able to agree on.
- Hire adequate staff at the DOE. You have good people working there but they are performing poorly because they are under-staffed and unable to accomplish the grand tasks voted on by the legislature every year.
- Learn from this. It's easy to pass a policy, but it takes time, it takes staying the course, it takes supports and it takes listening to stakeholders from the get go, not just when things go wrong. I know it feels good to swoop in and "release" people from the mandate, but remember it was your mandate and you failed to support its implementation.
- Focus proficiency-based diploma requirements ONLY in the areas of Math, ELA, Social Studies, and Science. Local control and flexibility in all other areas.
- Allow CTE Centers to award diplomas.
- Start standing up for what is right for students and don't buckle under the pressure of the minority.
- Read the white paper sponsored by Maine School Management in January 2017, "Maine Schools: Worth the Investment" so you can have factual data about the performance and efficiencies of Maine schools, and stay out of the weeds on things about which you have no knowledge (assessment, instruction, curriculum, etc.).
- Don't give up on major reform so quickly. Though there were areas of the law that were too rigorous, the intent was necessary and forward thinking.
- Be consistent

- Maintain CCSS/Learning Results while allowing districts to determine how best to teach, assess and report. It's difficult to enact improvements when state expectations keep changing.
- If you are going to make decisions on significant educational policy that require such significant changes, stay the course. This was a debacle that I believe hurts students.
- PB is the correct movement, continue but change roll out. Requiring different teaching practices is imperative, but for example having a funding formula based on grade levels and student numbers reinforces traditional thinking and scheduling practices. Start at the entry level (k-3) with requirements of PB and mastery etc. exceptions for sped...set a year for all schools to be practicing by. Then link funding to that, by inspection of practices in school. Then move up the "grade levels" incrementally doing the same. Remove grade levels as the organizing principle for schools, use developmental levels. Require separation of academic and behavior reporting, no commingling to determine performance. Pay for specific curriculum and assessment resource by the state again phase in up the grade level chain...this would by pure financial means cause all schools to shift ....
- Require (paid for by state) all schools to use NWEA assessments.
- TAKE THE LONG VIEW on the change process.
- Having just the two options, credit based vs proficiency in all 8 categories was a bad idea. It is not realistic and not what our students need. Having another option would likely convince more districts to embrace many of the good aspects of PBE.
- Special Education is obviously still a big concern. The language for our sped students was harmful, and regardless of how legislation is crafted, that language should be altered.
- The MLR should not be made more rigorous but should be pared down. Too many!
- Proficiency is good for students - we can't continue to educate using the industrial age model - our society no longer functions that way - learning is about trying, reflecting, and revision. No more one and done teaching models!
- When we pilot a program and analyze the results we are much more successful in moving forward. Educators will make a change in they are confident that it is in the best interest of students. I have yet to see a model PBE school or school system where student achievement, satisfaction, and college and career readiness has been demonstrated at higher levels than our current system.
- Make smaller shifts and stick with them. Listen to people on the ground, especially Superintendents who have the big picture in mind and understand all the dynamics that go into running (and improving) schools.
- There will be no parity until someone determines the minimum standard for all students in Maine. DOE needs to set this expectation in the same way they set the standards for Maine Learning Results.
- Be clear with high level outcomes...allow for local systems to implement and make whatever those high level outcomes are attainable! WORK WITH EDUCATIONAL LEADERS TO CREATE...don't do it in a vacuum!
- Get the language right. Understand the difference between "proficiency-based education" and "proficiency-based diploma" (including the creators of this survey.)

- It is important to remember that students learn at different rates and using different methods to demonstrate mastery. All students need opportunity to learn and to be able to create their own pathway. Our educational system must be flexible to accommodate all learning options.
- Wish they would make up their mind and stick to it. We feel we wasted 4 years implementing a system that caused a lot of stress to staff, students and community only to change direction.
- Local decisions/ board policies are preferable vs mandated changes without additional local options.
- Not to keep mandating new standards, approaches, or methods in education. Please let local districts do what is in the best interests of their own students without continuous disruption from the state.
- Look at all the time and effort spent to implement this initiative which is good for students. Where did it go? It was ended because it was work and there was not immediate gratification from the process. The loudest people got their way. This move has left a sour taste in everyone's mouth at the ability of DOE and the legislature to maintain the course to see a project to completion. Policy makers need to get out of the way of progress and stop legislating or making policy until the initiative has a framework and foundation. They should not build it as they are flying it.
- In the future, have a better plan for explaining to stakeholders especially parents what we are doing and why it is better than what they had.
- We need change in our schools and I haven't seen very many mandates that have helped us move forward. Listen to the people who are doing the work and focus more on promoting the positive instead of trying to find the negative.
- Please consider continuing to push forward with proficiency-based reporting systems. In whatever form that takes. Also, consider models we currently use at Technical Centers and in Special Education. Also, an incremental process is best over a long period of time with support and oversight from the state.
- I believe the initial goal for creating a proficiency-based reporting system (and personalized teaching and learning system) was to help more students be successful and to accurately report what they have learned to future employers and colleges.
- Please know it is impossible for all students to meet all standards in all content areas. It is more important for all students to learn certain standards well. Make sure students have some say in the choosing of the learning targets they will focus on, especially as they get older.
- Educators and other adults tend to get passionate about their set of standards. It starts to feel like job security advocacy work at times.
- I would like to see a law that would allow a hybrid system. You could grant credits when appropriate but also grant completion when the standards are met.
- Public school is the fabric of our state and country. Countries who are committed to education are also committed to a 'standard curriculum' to obtain specific outcomes as well as appropriate funding. We are making a choice when we don't make education a state priority, stop blaming the school community and take



responsibility for your actions. Maybe we should collaborate more and be inclusive of stakeholders before deciding on unfunded mandates or laws.

- Instead of starting a new initiative and working to modify that initiative "on the fly", take time PRIOR to pursuing new initiatives by working out all the wrinkles ahead of time.
- Require everyone to use proficiency based diploma system.
- Don't ever mandate proficiency-based diplomas again!
- A system that is nation wide, and not locally organized and arranged and changed.
- Standards-based diploma was a brave measure taken by Maine to ensure equity and equal access for a bright future for all Maine children. With such poor leadership from the DOE, the work was lost...gains lost. My suggestion is to provide the necessary support for this and all policies. PBL took it on the chin; it should have been the DOE...disappointing.
- If you are going to implement major initiatives that fundamentally change the nature of education, have a plan to support the work and stick to it. It makes a mockery of the work to consistently delay and then abandon deadlines.
- Do not pass any laws that you cannot stick with. Waste of time and tax dollars. With 5 Education Commissioners no wonder the original Strategic Plan that Steven Bowen remains inactive and on the shelf.
- Stop messing around with public schools.
- How could high achieving students distinguish themselves? What supports would be introduced to help SpEd students demonstrate proficiency?
- So long as the learning expectations and instructional time remain constant, student learning will continue to be variable. Please take the time to include the people who implement whatever comes next before adding or changing something. This will not be easy or fast, but well worth the effort in the end. The public school system was not created for all students to be successful, and it will take significant time and money to restructure it so more students can learn what's currently expected. Please be realistic about what can be accomplished given our current structure, and be prepared to fund the changes you would like to see.