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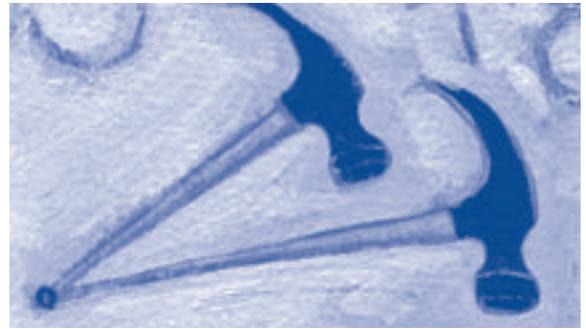
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# You Don't Always Get What You Want: Lessons to Be Learned from the Demise of Maine's Local Assessment System

by Rebecca H. Berger



*The recent repeal of Maine's local education assessment requirement was met with mixed reactions ranging from relief to outrage. That there were such differing responses points to the fact that "assessment" in education is understood in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways. In this article, Rebecca Berger looks retrospectively at how the problems associated with implementing Maine's local assessment system (LAS) were caused by a lack of understanding of important aspects of assessment as it relates to standards-based reform in education. Using examples from her case study of one Maine school district, Berger notes three areas of ongoing concern: lack of capacity at state and local levels to implement change; problems with alignment of curricula and assessments; and competing priorities among current federal and state reforms. Berger concludes with advice for Maine policymakers as they consider future standards-based reform efforts. 🐉*

It is no exaggeration to say that assessment is consuming educators all over the country. Current reform efforts, with the emphasis on alignment of educational standards and assessments, have been gathering steam since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). The 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has provided the most recent impetus to the standards and testing movement. Fifty states now have aligned state standards and assessments for math and language arts, and some states also assess other subjects (*Education Week* 2007b).

Common sense dictates that state and federally mandated assessments would encourage, rather than discourage, educational excellence. However, both state and federal educational assessment reforms have been enacted without a clear understanding of important factors, such as the relationship to state standards and the purpose of assessment. The term “assessment” is used by policymakers, politicians, administrators, teachers, researchers, and members of the general public in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways. The inconsistent definitions, assumptions, and applications that have been adopted by the various groups touting assessment reform have worked to the disadvantage of those most responsible for reform implementation—teachers and local administrators. For example, state and federal policymakers and political leaders are interested in assessment as a source for data that will be used to hold schools accountable. Teachers are interested in assessment as a means of informing instructional practice. Assessments that are suitable for one of these purposes may not be suitable for the other. These two approaches to assessment differ in other ways also—in particular, the application of measurement concepts such as validity and reliability. Thus conversations about assessment frequently use the same vocabulary but with very different purposes in mind.

Maine's implementation of its local assessment system (LAS) highlights the problems caused by this lack of understanding about important aspects of assessment as it relates to standards-based reform. The purpose of this article is to suggest some reasons for the failure of the LAS and to examine that failure in the wider context of state education policy. It is my

hope that educators and policymakers can learn lessons from the mistakes of the LAS that will improve their continuing efforts to successfully educate all Maine students.

## BACKGROUND

Maine began its journey towards standards-based reform with the adoption of the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA), a grade-specific standardized test, in 1984. Originally, the MEA was administered in grades 4, 8, and 11. It tested what would be considered the basic school subjects. After 1997, the MEA tested the content standards included in Maine's *Learning Results*, the standards document adopted by the Maine Legislature in 1996. Due to the federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), however, the MEA is currently administered yearly in grades 3 through 8 and in grade 11. Only math and language arts are currently tested, but science will be added in 2008.

The *Learning Results* are part of Title 20-A of the Maine Revised Statutes, a joint rule of the state Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education. In 1996 when the *Learning Results* were adopted, assessment was also included. Specifically, section 6209 of Title 20-A (Maine Revised Statutes, Section 6209) states that a combination of state and local assessments would measure student progress and ensure accountability with regard to the *Learning Results*. Chapter 127, also part of Title 20-A, is the articulation of the local assessment system mandated by this legislation. Its purpose is to set forth the purposes of and requirements for the design and implementation of the local assessment system (MDoE 2002b).

Early documents from the Maine Department of Education (MDoE) stressed that the original intent of the LAS was the use of multiple performance measures, not just standardized tests, to assess

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students (Goldman and Levesque 1997; Spruce 2000). The LAS was envisioned as a combination of state and local measures, with multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency. Maine eschewed total reliance on high-stakes standardized testing; the emphasis was to be on performance assessment that was embedded in the curriculum. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) on the federal level in late 2001, however, changed the conversation about assessment in Maine. Familiarly known as No Child Left Behind, this reauthorization instituted a new degree of accountability for states. The law required that all students meet predetermined performance standards by the year 2014, as determined by the use of standardized tests. Maine policymakers were faced with a dilemma: the federal government was mandating standardized tests at the precise moment that the state government was

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downplaying their importance. Attempts by officials at the Maine Department of Education to persuade the federal government to allow Maine to use data from LAS were unsuccessful, so Maine expanded the MEA to include all the grade levels required by NCLB (Patrick Phillips personal communication, March 28, 2004). Then in 2006, Commissioner Susan Gendron decided that for NCLB reporting purposes the 11th grade test would be the SAT rather than the MEA. Although the federal government originally balked at this idea, it has since given tentative approval. Maine has to administer additional testing in math and science to 11th graders because the federal government decided the SAT does not adequately measure student achievement in those subjects, but the MDoE maintains that the benefits of the SAT outweigh the problems of additional testing.

## ALIGNING STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENT: RESULTS IN MAINE TO DATE

Now in 2007 Maine has been in the middle of this alignment process for about 10 years. What have been the results? These might be described as lackluster at best. The 2007 edition of *Education Week's Quality Counts* report ranks Maine 39th in the nation with regard to implementation of standards and accountability measures (Education Week 2007a). And in spite of Maine's emphasis on standards-based learning and assessment, test scores for Maine students have shown only slight improvement. In addition, a task force on teacher workload has demonstrated wide dissatisfaction among teachers with regard to the implementation of the *Learning Results* and the local assessment systems (Harris and Fairman 2006).

The combination of LAS, NCLB, and the *Learning Results* proved so stressful for Maine teachers that Governor John Baldacci requested that a moratorium be enacted for 2006-2007 so that issues concerning the design and implementation of the LAS could be addressed. Education Commissioner Susan Gendron did not wait for the 2006-2007 school year to end before announcing that she will propose a repeal of the LAS (MDoE 2007). This announcement followed a number of studies, conducted by people from both inside and outside Maine, that detailed the burden imposed by the LAS (Fullan and Watson 2006; Harris and Fairman 2006; MEPRI 2004).

The demise of the LAS will not be mourned by many, although school personnel may be understandably upset at the amount of work expended on this mandate. However, its demise will be truly a wasted opportunity if Maine policymakers move on without examining why the LAS failed. An investigation into the problems of the LAS will help us to understand and perhaps avoid other potential problems related to standards-based reform.

Maine teachers have spent considerable time aligning curriculum to the *Learning Results*, but the results of this alignment process varied significantly from school district to school district. This was the result of variation in capacity at these different districts, and the lack of clarity in the standards themselves. By 2001 when I began my research, the

teachers involved had accepted the *Learning Results*, warts and all, and were using them when designing the curriculum. Their comfort level with the standards changed, however, when NCLB and the LAS arrived on the education scene. These policies removed teachers' abilities to engage in flexible interpretation of the *Learning Results* and substituted a system built entirely on standardization and accountability. The results have been questionable.

Three issues related to standards-based reform surfaced in the research I conducted that investigated the LAS and its implementation. First, educators were confused about assessment and the appropriate types of assessment to enhance learning. This was an on-going problem with the LAS. Second, there was the issue of the expectations and assumptions that accompany standards documents. What improvement in education could we reasonably expect from the *Learning Results*? Is the alignment of standards, instruction, and assessment unquestionably a good idea? Finally, there was the issue of capacity to implement reforms at both the state and local levels. Whether or not Maine teachers were able to design and implement the LAS was and is unclear. What is clear is that the MDoE did not have the capacity to implement such a huge undertaking as the LAS.

#### A LOCAL ASSESSMENT SYSTEM CASE STUDY

I used a case-study approach to investigate the effects of Maine's assessment policy on practitioners because of its potential for in-depth investigation of teachers' practices. The analysis presented in this article is based on research conducted from 2001 to 2003 with the cooperation of teachers and administrators in the Beaver Pond district. The Beaver Pond district (a pseudonym) has a reputation for innovative curriculum, administrative support for professional development, and excellent teaching. The research included access to meetings related to development of the LAS and interviews with and observations of individual teachers.

Experts in educational measurement caution that attempts to design assessment systems to serve multiple purposes will serve none of them well (Popham 1997; Delandshere 2001). This has been reaffirmed in the saga of the LAS. The case study of the Beaver Pond school district illustrates the range of practitioner reac-

tions when faced with the confusing and contradictory requirements that became part of LAS policy.

As individuals and as a district, the Beaver Pond teachers brought a good deal of expertise in assessment and assessment-related issues to their work in designing the LAS. Several of the teachers had been involved with scoring MEAs and discussing standard setting at the state level. Many had also participated in workshops related to different types of assessment. Collaborative relationships within grade levels and across the district had already been established through work on curriculum alignment. The administrators who were working with the assessment committee had a number of years of experience in the district and also had expertise in assessment. As a group, the assessment committee brought considerable capacity to bear on the issue of designing a local assessment system. Thus the reactions of this group of assessment-savvy individuals to the task of LAS design deserve special scrutiny.

Initially teachers were promised a great deal of control over the LAS. As the Beaver Pond LAS committee began its work in the fall of 2002, their discussions centered on issues of philosophical and practical concern. The committee wanted assessments to be useful for instructional decision making and they wanted a minimal number of assessments that were designed for purely federal or state data-gathering purposes. They thought that common classroom assessments, such as observation and individual work with students, should be included, and they were particularly concerned about their ability to meet the needs of individual students within such a system. "What's going to happen to these kids?" was a frequently asked question (Berger 2005:109). In addition, the practical issue of time was always on their minds. The committee members were all too aware of the amount of time that would be needed to design and implement the LAS and the amount of time that could be expended in giving the required assessments.

Nevertheless, at monthly meetings, the committee worked to gain consensus on what they referred to as the "backbone" of the LAS. This was made more difficult, however, by the lack of guidelines from the MDoE. Promised clarifications about important aspects of the LAS were slow in coming. Numbers of assessments, clarification of terms, requirements for

evaluating assessment validity, and other questions went unanswered or were answered differently by different people. The committee spent the 2002-2003 school year working on the overall outline of the system and planning for some trial common assessments.

In June 2003, the MDoE issued its *LAS Guide*. With its publication, the “local” part of the LAS gave way to control by the MDoE. This publication officially made accountability a stronger focus of the LAS, and it was more prescriptive about such details as types of assessments, number of assessments, content standards to be assessed, validity protocols, and reliability guidelines. Many of these new requirements, however, called for the specialized knowledge of measurement experts, and it was difficult for teachers to find the time to become adept at designing assessments that did justice to these concepts.

As the state assumed more control over the parameters of the LAS, teacher resistance set in. The assessment committee began to focus on meeting the letter of the law instead of designing a system that incorporated a rich range of assessments that could improve teaching. As the state mandated more and more elements of the LAS, the Beaver Pond committee decided, in the words of one research participant, to “stick with what we have to do. Whatever we put down, we will be accountable for.” For example, the committee dropped the portfolio for language arts as part of the LAS because committee members were unsure of the accountability guidelines for teachers and students regarding portfolios. The members of the Beaver Pond assessment committee had some understanding of assessments other than tests, but as state policy became more prescriptive in the guidelines for the LAS, the committee grew more cautious in what they were willing to propose. When important information about the task at hand changes from month to month due to actions at higher levels, local enactors become reluctant to take bold steps. Indeed, one participant foresaw the day when teachers would select an assessment from a MDoE Web site, plan a unit of instruction around the assessment, and proceed from there. That this is merely another form of “teaching to the test” did not occur to her.

Teachers respond to increased standardization and accountability in several ways. Sometimes they simplify

the curriculum so that they and their students are held accountable for both less material and less challenging material. Linda McNeil (2000) refers to this as “defensive simplification.” Teachers may also seek to control the pace and amount of reform, implementing just enough change to create impressions of compliance and progress. I refer to this as “cautious implementation.” Both of these are useful concepts for analyzing the reactions of the research participants to the changes brought about by the LAS.

Defensive simplification appeared as a response to the degree of alignment required by the *Learning Results* even before the LAS work. Teachers dropped anything that could not be directly tied to a performance indicator in the *Learning Results*. They removed topics and units, e.g., poetry, from the curriculum at certain grade levels because they were not listed in the standards. In another disturbing example of simplification, teachers began to use the exact language of the Learning Results in writing curriculum. Using the standards as the only framework for curriculum design ignores a great deal of knowledge that students could be legitimately studying and imbues them with a validity and legitimacy that is far beyond what these standards, or the process that produced them, can support. For example, the math and science portions of the standards had been expressly modeled after national standards that encourage constructivist approaches for young children, including exploration and conversation leading to a more robust understanding of concepts. This type of instruction takes time. However, the large number of topics per grade level that teachers were responsible for left little time for the presentation of exploratory lessons, instead favoring lessons with more structured outcomes and didactic explanations of the information. In the words of one research participant, “the *Learning Results* are dumbing everything down.”

Defensive simplification is one strategy that both individuals and systems adopt to deal with the constricting requirements of standards linked to assessment and accountability that have come to dominate the educational landscape in Maine and elsewhere. In addition to defensive simplification, however, the MDoE's confusing and contradictory interpretations of LAS requirements and the frequent changes in the most

basic information about LAS design, led to a pattern of schools implementing assessment systems that minimally satisfied the mandated demands instead of fully revising their assessment practices. This reaction is an example of cautious implementation, an approach that has been called “hedging bets” (Wilson and Floden 2001). This understandable reaction occurs when reforms lack clarity and when the state-level personnel who should be clarifying and implementing policy do not have the capacity to do so. The LAS was a classic case.

The concept of hyperrationalization (Wise 1979) can be used to clarify the relationship between practitioners, the *Learning Results*, and the LAS. Hyperrationalization occurs when a tight mechanism of goals and controls undercuts, rather than supports, the fundamental purpose of the enterprise. As long as the *Learning Results* could be interpreted at the local level, school personnel worked with these standards with a certain degree of comfort. The same was true of the initial workshops about assessment, which the MDoE facilitated with the understanding that issues raised in the workshops would lead to continued conversations on the local level. The LAS requirements, however, incrementally introduced a degree of control outside of local School Administrative Units (SAUs) that threatened to curtail teachers' professional judgment. In addition, the assessment reforms were poorly conceived and executed, resulting in a great deal of effort expended by Maine teachers on a mandate that will now be altered significantly. This attempted alignment of the *Learning Results* and the LAS epitomizes the hyperrationalization that Wise (1979) cautioned against. The cautionary note sounded here is that unanticipated negative effects such as narrowing the curriculum, decreased instructional and curricular creativity, concerns about standardization and challenges to the professionalism of teachers may be present in any attempt to tightly align all areas of school experience in the name of accountability.

#### STANDARDS-BASED REFORM AND CAPACITY

The two issues described above, defensive simplification and cautious implementation, are sides of the same coin. They are understandable mechanisms

that people employ when faced with professional demands that are unrealistic, confusing, contradictory, and that undermine their professional knowledge. Rather than demonstrating a lack of teacher capacity, defensive simplification and cautious implementation reflect a capacity on the part of practitioners to read the political landscape well enough to develop whatever documents were necessary to give an appearance of compliance with regulations. In the case of the *Learning Results*, this meant that school districts aligned their curricula with the standards, at least on paper. What this meant in practice, however, was only loosely defined. In the case of LAS development, the Beaver Pond committee attempted to follow the letter of the

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law without committing to specifics except in cases where there was general consensus within the group of teachers affected by the assessment, such as a common writing prompt. Thus teachers in the Beaver Pond district moved ahead with aspects of LAS implementation that they considered beneficial but held back on full-scale LAS adoption.

The use of the concept of teacher capacity as an analytical framework can help us to make sense of teachers' responses to the LAS. Teacher capacity is generally understood as the ability of teachers to understand and implement reform (Snow-Renner 1998; Spillane 1999). Using this limited definition of teacher capacity, however, undercuts teachers'

professional judgment in important ways. Within this definition of teacher capacity, teachers' reluctance to adopt reforms is seen as a roadblock to implementation, rather than a rational response to educational reforms they see as problematic. A fuller definition of teacher capacity that includes teacher experience and knowledge better explains the varied responses I observed during my research.

Beaver Pond teachers and administrators appreciated the opportunities for increased collaboration with colleagues and for conversations about expectations for student performance afforded by their work on the LAS. The chair of the Beaver Pond assessment committee focused on improving teaching, learning, and assessment by building teachers' ability to assess and evaluate students' work. Because of collaborative

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experiences with assessment, teachers on the assessment committee incorporated practices that they considered useful into the LAS. Their increased confidence in their ability to push local policy decisions, at least initially, empowered them to be proactive about some aspects of LAS design rather than waiting for the state to interpret every last detail. This ability to interpret policy locally is an important aspect of local capacity.

However, knowing what you *don't* want is also a powerful aspect of capacity. Resistance was building as state and federal control of the process increased. Teachers thought these intrusions ignored their abilities as professionals and therefore became frustrated. The assessment committee became extremely cautious, creating an isolated rather than systemic approach to assessment reform. Although this approach may have served the needs of the teachers, it was not what the original vision of the LAS entailed.

The original vision of Maine policymakers was to develop an assessment system that relied minimally on standardized testing, but used a "constellation of assessments" as the means to document student progress toward mastery of the *Learning Results* (Coladarci et al. 2000). A number of school administrative units (SAUs) made a promising start with assessment before the LAS, and some of this work, e.g., *Grand Ideas and Practical Work* (Spruce 2000) shaped the Chapter 127 legislation. Moving this work from local contexts to a statewide-mandated system was a mistake, which was augmented by the requirement that the LAS be used for both accountability and to improve classroom practice. The addition of NCLB further muddied the waters, but LAS would have collapsed on its own due to initial mistakes in its conceptualization along with the unreasonable additions to the workload required to develop and to administer the assessments.

It is important to note that making assessment for accountability the primary purpose of the LAS as described in the *LAS Guide* (MDoE 2003) also had the unintended consequence of undermining individual teacher capacity. I observed teachers with considerable knowledge of assessment practices begin to doubt their ability to properly assess students. Two teachers, astute users of individualized formative assessment, told me that they did not see themselves as being good at "assessment." This was because their idea of how to gauge learning was more nuanced and complex than the simple measurement of discrete skills. Because these assessment systems were narrowly designed for accountability, these teachers began to undervalue their competency with assessment. The problem, however, was with the system and its definition of learning and assessment, not with the teachers.

Most experienced teachers have the capacity to adapt to many types of individuals and many situations. They are accustomed to operating in tangled and uncertain domains. Forcing teachers to adhere to a standardized system that obscures individual student traits and abilities and that they consider counterproductive might not have produced immediate teacher rebellion, but neither did it produce an approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment that served Maine students well.

Under the guise of local control, Maine's *Learning Results* and the LAS increased non-local control of teachers' work and decision making. Nevertheless, teachers were reluctant to publicly address the issues of standardization and accountability from the vantage point of their professional judgment and experience, perhaps because of the politics and rhetoric of reform. It is difficult to mount an argument against something called "No Child Left Behind," especially when that piece of legislation passed with overwhelming bipartisan national support. Teachers who critiqued the reforms appeared to be afraid of being held accountable and to stand in the way of reform. Teachers' attempts to retain ownership of professional decisions were seen as problematic rather than as a positive aspect of capacity.

In addition to redefining capacity at the local level, we need to consider issues of state capacity if Maine is to learn from the mistakes of the LAS and move forward. Furthermore, state capacity needs to be linked to an overarching goal or vision that directs reform efforts. In her news release of January 30, 2007, Commissioner Gendron (MDoE 2007) cited Fullan and Watson (2006), who recommended the need to articulate "a brief, clear and compelling vision" for education in Maine. Fullan and Watson (2006: 20) advocate for "reducing emphasis on assessment and putting more energy into effective instructional practices."

Three other points also need to be considered. First is the issue of top-down policy and the problems inherent in this type of policy. Local practitioner buy-in is crucial for meaningful reform to occur; teachers must have a sense of ownership in the reform effort. Time and again, research has shown that teachers approach major reforms cautiously and use considerable leeway in interpretation and implementation (Tyack and Cuban 1995; Wilson and Floden 2001). The MDoE does not have the personnel to oversee compliance by SAUs on a scale that would ensure a common interpretation down to the last detail, even if that were a good idea. As research on the LAS has shown, teachers may have negative attitudes about state-level policies for good reasons. Second, the state should not enact major legislation without some idea of the state and local capacity necessary to implement it. Capacity includes both tangible (money and personnel) and intangible

(knowledge, understanding, buy-in) aspects, and policymakers need to be wary of setting state policy that depends on local efforts without ascertaining that the capacity exists at that level. The MDoE assumed that all SAUs had the same initial capacity for dealing with mandated reforms, and they proceeded as if all essential background and information were held in common by all school personnel. This was not the case. For example, as the LAS was implemented across the state, problems with idiosyncratic interpretations of the *Learning Results* surfaced regularly. The MDoE made attempts to survey superintendents and others to ensure common implementation of the *Learning Results*, but this method relies on self-reported data. The MDoE, however, lacks the appropriate staff levels to follow-up on a statewide level with these surveys and to assist with developing the common understandings necessary to a consistent interpretation of the *Learning Results*. Before starting any other major educational reforms we must ask what level of knowledge and expertise is assumed by the policy, and how will policymakers know the capacity of SAUs in relation to this?

Third, Maine must avoid legislation, however well intentioned, that cannot be implemented well. I refer to this as "road to hell" legislation. The unintended negative consequences of both the LAS and NCLB have overwhelmed students and teachers. A discussion of these consequences is beyond the scope of this article, but would include narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, and increasing the drop out/push out rate (Cawelti 2006; Corn 2006). As in the earlier discussion of hyperrationalization, when legislation actually produces results that are contrary to the best interests of students, it's time to call a halt. Maine policymakers must pay attention not only to what is desirable but to what is possible, given state and local capacity constraints.

## CONCLUSIONS

The repeal of the LAS, coupled with the revision of the *Learning Results*, offers Maine policymakers the opportunity to examine the results from a decade of standards-based reform efforts. Is there evidence that policymakers have learned from past experiences? I would suggest that lessons relating to capacity in

particular have not been learned. As an example, the revision of the *Learning Results* was intended to be of major consequence for education in Maine. To address the assumptions and counter the mistakes that were part of the original introduction of the standards as well as highlight the aspirations for the new version is a major undertaking. How will the MDoE ensure that SAUs are in tune with the new *Learning Results*? How will the new vision be understood and implemented?

Furthermore several competing reforms have been introduced at this time, with little or no attention paid to the issue of whether state and/or local capacity exists to advance them. An example of a competing policy issue is Commissioner Gendron's charge that all students leaving Maine high schools will be ready for college, work, and citizenship (MDoE 2007). Will the revised *Learning Results* contribute to this? How will differences in local capacity be accounted for as the new *Learning Results* are implemented? What consideration has been given to the different kinds of preparation that may be required for each of these paths? Is this another instance where the consequences of the vision, laudable as it may be, have not been fully explored? Can Maine high schools respond to this challenge in ways that guarantee a common outcome for students?

We must also consider teachers' professional knowledge and competency as an aspect of capacity. One of the more curious outcomes of standards-based reform has been the marginalization of the professionals who know the most about students and life in schools—teachers and local administrators. As discussed earlier, the design and implementation of the LAS evolved from a system with an emphasis on local control to a more prescriptive system. Standards-based education undercuts teachers' professionalism in ways that go beyond the problems of the LAS, however. Current practices force teachers, against their better judgment, to reduce their perceptions and knowledge of individual students' backgrounds, interests, and dispositions and rely more on an evaluation of learning that emphasizes only part of students' abilities, academic or otherwise. Teachers acknowledge the potential benefits of standards, but they also know that all students cannot be held accountable to the same high standard, and they worry about students who, for one reason or another, would have difficulty meeting a

given standard. As the Beaver Pond teachers frequently asked, "What's going to happen to these kids?" The mandates of standards-based education, including the testing component of NCLB, run counter to the professional knowledge of teachers and administrators who recognize that children grow and develop at different rates, and that there are intangible social and emotional components to successful learning. Teachers' abilities to make sound decisions regarding their students are jeopardized, and they are concerned about the implications of this.

Supporters of standards-based reform invest a great deal of faith in standards and standards documents. Standards are only as good as the teachers and administrators who put them into practice. By themselves, a set of standards will not raise achievement levels. They will not ensure that students graduate from school ready for the 21st century, nor will they automatically enable fulfillment of any of the other promises that have been made over the years regarding the *Learning Results*. Perhaps the *Learning Results* can be a catalyst for improved learning, however that is defined, but they will not bring it about by themselves. A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the *Learning Results* needs to be ongoing.

The assumption that the *Learning Results* would support the type of alignment demanded by Chapter 125 (MDoE 2002a) was never challenged. The original vision of the *Learning Results* was that they would inform the curriculum, not *be* the curriculum (MDoE 1997: vi). This admirable philosophy was undermined by the realities of standardized assessment. When the MEA and LAS were linked to the *Learning Results*, teachers lost the ability to use the standards as a guide rather than a mandated curriculum. Many performance indicators in the *Learning Results* were initially open to interpretation, but teachers began to focus their instruction on the way the material had been presented on the MEA, regardless of the scope of the performance indicator. The *Learning Results*, compiled by people who had the best interests of Maine students at heart, did not include any attempt to validate the standards before they were implemented. While this may not have been crucial when teachers had interpretive leeway, it was a fatal flaw when the *Learning Results* had to serve as the foundation for the complicated LAS.

Increased standardization that cuts across curriculum, instruction, and assessment is another concern related to teachers' professionalism. The Beaver Pond teachers saw some benefits in standardizing some curricular components across the district, but they did not want to be dictated to. They wanted to decide what to include in their classrooms. This perceived loss of discretion at the classroom level was an ongoing complaint about the LAS (Walker 2004, 2006).

Writing in *Education Week*, Ronald Wolk (2006) maintains that "betting everything on standards-based reform is neither wise nor necessary" (2006: 49). Maine policymakers should take this to heart. The system of *Learning Results* has developed in such a way that learning is subjugated to the standards. The standards have become an end in themselves rather than a guide that will enable good practice. Realistically, "achieving the system of *Learning Results*," in the language of state policy documents, has no common meaning and does not by itself ensure well-educated students. Focusing so much of our effort on the alignment of standards and assessment and the accountability that is inherent in that process ultimately constricts the creativity and innovation that are among the strongest aspects of schooling in the United States. We are in real danger of losing the creativity that has sustained the competitive edge that contributes to our country's success in this era of globalization (Zhao 2006). Standards should serve learning. This subversion of the well-intentioned goals of standards-based reform in Maine is evidence that good intentions are not enough. Now is the time to reevaluate the system and put standards and assessment back in the service of learning. Our students deserve no less. 🐼



**Rebecca H. Berger** is an associate professor of education at the University of Maine at Farmington. Her research interests include assessment and the role of teachers in educational reform. Both of these interests are rooted in her work prior to entering higher education as a classroom teacher in K-12 public schools.

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