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Educational Reform: An Interview with Commissioner J. Duke Albanese

J. Duke Albanese

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Few issues touch the hearts, minds, and lives of Mainers more than education. Learning Results, budgetary concerns, violence in schools, and school choice are among the issues that occupy much of the public policy focus of educators, administrators, taxpayers, and lawmakers alike. In this interview, Commissioner Albanese addresses some of these education issues, most notably Learning Results and their potential impact on education in Maine.

Since August 1996, J. Duke Albanese has served as commissioner of the Maine Department of Education. Before being named to that post, Commissioner Albanese was superintendent of schools for School Administrative District 47, which includes the Belgrade Lakes region communities of Oakland, Sidney, Belgrade, and Rome. During a career in education that spans twenty-five years, the Bowdoin College and University of Maine graduate has served in numerous capacities, including assistant superintendent of schools, social studies teacher, guidance counselor, adult education counselor, social studies department chair, assistant and head football coach, career counselor, and student council advisor.

Albanese has received numerous honors, including the Bowdoin College Distinguished Educator Award in 1995; Commissioner's Award for Contributions to Maine's Public Schools in 1994; Maine School Superintendent of the Year in 1992; and Maine Education Media Association's Service Award for School Administrators, 1991-1992. The East Providence, R.I., native was a finalist for Maine Teacher of the Year in 1976.

Maine Policy Review (MPR): One of the hottest topics in educational reform concerns state-imposed standards, or "Learning Results." What are the implications and importance of Learning Results?

Commissioner Albanese: From my perspective, Learning Results represent extraordinary and unprecedented public policy. They clearly describe what all students in Maine should know and be able to do. And, in conjunction with comprehensive assessment, they bring us back to more authentic ways of demonstrating learning. They're about tying disciplines together whenever possible. They place more responsibility on students to show adults and their own peers that they have acquired the knowledge and skills of learning.

MPR: Is Maine a leader in this? What are other states doing?

Albanese: Virtually every state is in the midst of some type of standards work. But Maine's work is ambitious, creative, and homegrown. If something similar does exist, I haven't seen it. The Learning Results were crafted by Maine citizens and educators--literally thousands of individuals participated in the process. We have a document that identifies eight content areas

and articulates learning for children at different segments of the educational process: at the end of grades K-2, 3-4, 5-8, and high school. At each level of learning, children should be able to demonstrate certain levels of achievement and competency. But the standards don't tell school systems and classroom teachers how to get there; rather they describe the "ends" of learning. They provide full academic freedom regarding teaching and local curriculum design. We don't want to get in the way of creative teachers or school systems, or tell school systems how to sequence and articulate curriculum. We certainly don't want to mess with what we're already doing well. Learning Results are helpful to the extent that they articulate what children should know and be able to do across eight areas. They get us on the same page. Ultimately, Learning Results are about accountability, which resides within school systems, school committees, teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

MPR: American school systems have been criticized for having low expectations or asking only the top 20 percent of students to have high expectations. Learning Results would change that so all students would have similar expectations, right?

Albanese: Traditionally, America's approach to education has been about sorting and grouping kids based on early and varying expectations. Learning Results are contrary to this whole notion. They focus on age groups and all kids learning at high levels.

Some say this is crazy, that "those" kids can't do this. We respond by saying Learning Results will not redefine tomorrow what high school kids need to know. Instead, they are about starting when children are inducted into school and having high expectations for children all the way through their school experiences. Some children will demonstrate their learning sooner. For others, it will take longer to demonstrate the literacy levels that Learning Results set forth.

We're concerned that the high school diploma has become a rite of passage. We hear this from college admissions officers and employers in Maine. We want to make sure that when students leave Maine high schools they have the option of pursuing higher education. You know, Maine is sixth nationally in terms of high school completion, which is aside from the issue of what kind of literacy they're armed with when they leave. But, we don't have a good record in terms of educational aspirations. A relatively low number of our students pursue secondary education, whether that is a certificate program, an associate degree, or a baccalaureate four-year degree. And, for whatever reason, Maine students have poor retention rates at the postsecondary level; that is, there are high drop-out rates after the first semester of college study. We want more youngsters to be able and ready to pursue higher education. And if students choose to enter the work place, we want their employers to be satisfied.

MPR: Where did Learning Results come from?

Albanese: The impetus for Learning Results began in 1984 on the heels of the report, A Nation at Risk. There was an unprecedented special session of the Maine Legislature in September 1984 when legislators gathered to consider the Report on the Status of Education in Maine. That led to many good things for Maine children, particularly in improvements to libraries, guidance services, and student-teacher ratios. These reforms set the stage for a new dialogue. By the end

of the 1980s, people said: *Let's think differently about schools, how they're organized, and the prevailing practices in classrooms. How do we know what children know? What measures do we embrace?*

Unfortunately, this dialogue was beginning as the economy began to sour. There was a huge siphoning away of available intellectual and psychological energies. Many of Maine's educators and citizens became focused on getting the annual school budget passed and battling Augusta for adequate funds.

Despite hard times, the good ideas of the late 1980s started to mature. First, we responded to broad questions about learning and assessment by producing Maine's Common Core of Learning, which, by the way, has been used in virtually every state and many foreign countries as the beginning of conversations on a vision about education. Then, by the early 1990s the state moved forward with the Task Force on Learning Results. The task force was charged, by statute, to build from the foundation of Maine's Common Core of Learning to specifically tackle the question: *What would an educated person look like?* I have tried to explain to educators in other parts of the United States how challenging it has been to address this question in a New England state. New England is the bastion of "home rule," or local control. Consequently, we have had to conduct a process that serves the abiding interest of Maine citizens in public education without eroding or dampening the enthusiasm and assertions of home rule. Last year, the Legislature embraced the concept of Learning Results, although only after considerable debate. While their debate covered the landscape, at the heart of it was the issue of whether the state has the right to establish standards regarding local public education.

MPR: Does the debate about local versus state control of schools continue?

Albanese: Yes, it is a real issue. In addition, there has been concern expressed by groups that represent different religious affiliations. The resource question hasn't gone away, either. Even with a modest price tag, the question of how to pay for these reforms continues to loom.

One additional criticism we faced last year concerned the perception that the Learning Results represented an "inside deal," or that it was shipped in from Washington. The truth is we have met with thousands of people--in public hearings, work sessions, summits, etc. In fact, the process of developing the Learning Standards began with a series of summits, one that involved 400 Maine teachers. Certainly, those involved looked at the national standards in math, science, English, and other subject areas. They looked at all the work. But in the end, the Learning Results were crafted by Maine people.

MPR: Would you say the Learning Results are accepted by Maine's educational community?

Albanese: I think most educators understand the need for Learning Results. What's frustrating educators is the money issue. The state says Learning Results are important, and then we quibble over funding issues. For example, a law passed in the last session recognized that an important aspect of the implementation of Learning Results involves the professional development of educators--17,000 teachers and administrators. We all have to learn more about an educational system that is standards-driven and uses multiple approaches for assessment. Some districts are

quite mature in terms of articulating their standards and then using multiple assessments to measure student achievement. Other districts haven't even had the beginning conversations about this reform and these practices. Yet funding for this aspect of Learning Results continues to be debated.

The second aspect of Learning Results the budget calls for focuses on assessment. We have administered the Maine Education Assessment (MEA) for twelve years. Now, these assessments will be revised to reflect the foundation of Learning Results. The law mandates a mix of state-level and local assessment practices. We do not know of another state that has such a comprehensive model in the works, and I believe we're on the leading edge. In many states, they're just beginning to implement assessment processes like the MEAs.

MPR: How do you convince other constituencies, outside of education, that Learning Results are a good thing? How will we know this is good? Why spend money on this reform when others haven't worked?

Albanese: First, Learning Results do not represent "pie-in-the-sky" experimentation. Much of the learning that comprises this educational reform comes from longtime conversations and practices. Some of the concepts date to the middle of the last century. For example, Joshua Chamberlain, to get out of high school and accepted into college, had to demonstrate in a variety of ways what he knew and was able to do. During those times it was very common for people to go through more overt demonstrations of what they knew and could do. Most of the communities I've talked with have embraced Learning Results. They say: *We like the way it gives us some benchmarks and targets, the way it articulates the "ends" of learning without telling us how to do it.*

In addition, thousands of Maine people have helped shape the Learning Results, including policy makers, business people, teachers, parents, etc. Some businesses have shown their support by sponsoring citizen focus groups throughout Maine. A critical review committee spent weeks last summer going over every word in the document. We conducted nine public hearings on Learning Results in January 1997. They were held all over the state. What we heard from people is that they want Learning Results to go forward. Many believe this is our chance to achieve equity, that there really are vast differences in the types of programs offered to children.

The statutory language that will be most problematic targets three areas: Modern and Classical Languages, Performing and Visual Arts, and Career Preparation. In these areas there is a provision to delay adoption based on adequate funding. The difficulty is that school districts vary greatly in these areas. For example, there are funding implications for districts that only have one art teacher. In addition, we know of only three districts in Maine that have foreign language programs in grades three through twelve. Yet schools are very creative and value these subject areas differently. For example, some communities of very modest wealth support the arts in extraordinary ways.

Maine's Learning Results & Standards *"The Guiding Principles"*

Each student must leave school as:

A. A CLEAR AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR WHO:

- 1) Uses oral, written, visual, artistic, and technological modes of expression;
- 2) Reads, listens to, and interprets messages from multiple sources; and
- 3) Uses English and at least one other language.

B. A SELF-DIRECTED AND LIFE-LONG LEARNER WHO:

- 1) Creates career and education plans that reflect personal goals, interests and skills, and available resources;
- 2) Demonstrates capacity to undertake independent study; and
- 3) Finds and uses information from libraries, electronic data bases, and other resources.

C. A CREATIVE AND PRACTICAL PROBLEM SOLVER WHO:

- 1) Observes situations objectively to clearly and accurately define problems;
- 2) Frames questions, and designs data collection and analysis strategies from all disciplines to help answer them;
- 3) Identifies patterns, trends, and relationships which apply to problem solutions; and
- 4) Generates a variety of solutions, builds a case for the best response, and critically evaluates its effectiveness.

D. A RESPONSIBLE AND INVOLVED CITIZEN WHO:

- 1) Recognizes the power of personal participation to affect the community and demonstrates participation skills;
- 2) Understands the importance of accepting responsibility for personal decisions and actions;
- 3) Knows the means of achieving personal and community health and well-being; and
- 4) Recognizes and understands the diverse nature of society.

E. A COLLABORATIVE AND QUALITY WORKER WHO:

- 1) Knows the structure and functions of the labor market;
- 2) Assesses individual interests, aptitudes, skills, and values in relation to the demands of the work place; and
- 3) Demonstrates reliability, flexibility, and concern for quality.

F. AN INTEGRATIVE AND INFORMED THINKER WHO:

- 1) Applies knowledge and skills in and across English language arts, visual and performing arts, foreign languages, health and physical education, mathematics, science, social studies, and career preparation; and
- 2) Comprehends relationships among different modes of thought and methods associated with the traditional disciplines.

MPR: How does Maine's education system compare to the rest of the nation?

Albanese: In the last month we've received some incredible news. Maine just finished first in the nation in fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics. In addition, Education Week recently reported the results of a major study of schools, state by state. The study's lead category concerned having high standards for all kids and expecting high performance. Maine finished first in the country. That's pretty impressive. The second major category was school climate--defined as the conduciveness for learning and teaching. Maine ranked second in the country behind Vermont. Just recently, the New York Times ran a feature editorial calling for other states to look to Maine regarding public education, lauding the state's performance. And two weeks ago, Maine students did it again. Secretary of Education Richard Riley announced in Washington

that Maine eighth-graders finished first in the nation in science. In addition, one of the study's subcategories examined resources and efficiency; that is, the amount of money that actually reaches the classroom to support teaching and learning. Maine tied for first with New York and Utah. These are really positive statements about what is working in Maine.

The last finding counters the generalized belief that we have too much overhead. In fact, we have worked hard to bring more efficiency to our education system. Six months ago, in partnership with the University of Maine, we commissioned a study for the Penquis Group that showed 23 percent of Maine's school administrators have been eliminated during the past four years. It's not entirely surprising we finished number one in terms of getting money to the classroom. Yet the perception persists that we have all these people out there. I know of schools where there are 700 students, fifty faculty and one principal. That's it. That's lean management. There's no similar comparison anywhere--even in the private sector. But the perception persists.

The fact we're doing quite well in a number of areas does build an argument for those people who say we're already doing well enough. They ask: *Why do we need Learning Results? Why move forward?* My argument is that complacency is a real danger. Its ugly head will haunt you if you fail to take the long view. We would be in real trouble if we simply thought about today.

Learning Results are about the long view. When I meet with commissioners from other states, they want to talk about Maine. States like Massachusetts and Maryland now are signing contracts to do the same kinds of assessment we've been doing for twelve years. In many cases, they're just beginning to articulate standards. Quite frankly, we have an advantage and we're looking to see how Maine kids perform against international competition.

MPR: Many studies show that U.S. children do not perform as well as their international peers, but that our students tend to catch up later, particularly through higher education. What is your view?

Albanese: From several different sources I've heard "beware." We've always touted our clear advantages in higher education and in world competition, and we produce far more Ph.D.s. Yet there is evidence that if we don't up the ante for high school graduates and further invest in our collegiate institutions, we could lose all our advantage in twenty years. Vice President Gore and the Secretary of Education recently told the states' commissioners that this is their major concern. It gets back to the issue of complacency. It's problematic if we don't act now.

MPR: What is your view of the school funding issue and the viability of the funding formula? Is it creating inequities across the state?

Albanese: Adequacy of funding is a frustrating issue for me. In terms of the funding formula, several issues are contributing to its divisiveness. First, it has been changed to accommodate fewer and fewer available dollars. No matter how this is done, it will not be embraced by everyone, although there are some limitations in the formula itself that make it ill-equipped to deal with less money. Recently, there's been concern expressed that proportionately more dollars are going to schools in the southern regions of Maine. The explanation for this is complex. Essentially, the formula is driven by enrollment and valuation trends. Looking back to the mid-

1980s, valuations increased in the southern parts of the state. In addition, much more money was available for schools. The state was investing heavily, and so were local taxpayers. What happened was less new money went to southern Maine communities while central and northern Maine communities were getting considerably more. However, toward the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the trend of state valuations shifted. For example, I was superintendent in a school district that went from 68 percent state money to 49 percent almost overnight because property values in the Belgrade Lakes region changed dramatically and the state was unable to sustain prior subsidy levels.

As the economy took a real dip, valuations were climbing in central and northern Maine and declining in southern Maine. These types of changes drive the formula, but it was poor timing. As a result, some poorer communities in Maine were getting lower state subsidies at the same time the total state subsidy was shrinking. The highest-receiving school districts were getting clobbered because of trends in valuation and the state having less money.

The second factor that drives the funding formula is enrollment, meaning that the formula counts the number of students. Enrollment trends have been increasing in southern Maine and, generally, central and northern Maine have been losing enrollment, maintaining levels if they are lucky. Again, this trend is complicated by the fact that there's less money to go around.

What state government also needs to recognize is that people across the state are concerned about property taxes. They want to support schools, but feel that since fiscal year 1990-1991 the state has had to, or chosen to, limit its contributions to public education. For many communities the property tax has been the buffer, picking up much of the difference.

MPR: Trends are pretty historic in that regard.

Albanese: Yes. State general purpose aid either has been flat or grown modestly, but at a rate less than the Consumer Price Index. In contrast, support for local schools from local-option monies without any state participation is growing at a much steeper rate.

Three weeks ago, Vermont's Supreme Court ruled that state's school funding formula unconstitutional because of its over reliance on the property tax. Basically, the court's message to Vermont was: *You're inviting inequity when you use property taxes to the extent that you do to determine the programs offered to children.* Maine's system is not as reliant on the property tax as Vermont's, but we're moving in the wrong direction, in my opinion. At one time, the state funded 50 percent or more of the costs of education. Today we're down to 43 percent. We're going in the wrong direction, becoming less progressive. I believe tax policy plays a major role in this trend, and I'm concerned.

Currently, the Legislature is debating whether to fund a study of essential services and programs, as well as a blue-ribbon commission to look at the school funding issue. We've done several of these types of studies, so the charge to that group would be to decide what essential services and programs all Maine kids should have and then examine the recommendations of the school funding task forces that have met during the past few years. This process requires careful scrutiny, but it is time to take action.

MPR: Where do Learning Results fit in to these studies?

Albanese: Studies on how to fund essential services and programs are taking place in some states. Basically, they are deciding what all kids should be able to access for a program and determining the state's role in ensuring that access. Arguably, Learning Results gets us to a statewide agreement about literacy for kids and how to measure learning. In order to take the long view of how we fund schools and what tax policies will collect the revenue, this state needs to support essential services and programs. We've got to know in what direction Maine schools are going. Learning Results are that link to school funding reform because they articulate what all kids need to have for a core curriculum.

MPR: What are your views on school choice and charter schools?

Albanese: I think charter schools offer some good food for thought. We should look at them. However, one thing I'm troubled by is the assumption that charter schools will be better because they are immune from some set of bureaucratic requirements that guide public schools. I think we need to look at what their argument is for distancing themselves. If that argument constitutes good policy, let's look at it for all public schools. In addition, why not hold all schools to a higher level of performance (i.e., Learning Results) and get rid of those things charter schools want to walk away from?

On the other hand, I would limit conversations on choice to the public school realm. The choice issue becomes very complicated because of dollars. There are choice policies in Maine now. In some school unions and in many communities, parents and their kids can decide what high school to attend. Also, there is a provision in the law that allows two superintendents to agree in the best interests of the child to move him or her across borders. There's an appeal process for when disagreements arise. It's not a stretch to consider broadening choice options, but the debate needs parameters and the participation of existing school committees and superintendents.

States like Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts have experienced some success with choice. It's worth examining for Maine. In fact, approximately 15 percent of our children already move between districts frequently. So the notion of choice, within the parameters of shared Learning Results, makes sense and warrants further consideration and debate.

MPR: What are the benefits of school choice?

Albanese: Choice seems to be "the American way." We go to the market expecting a selection. I think many parents simply want alternatives, although for some, the reasons are very practical--it's about day care and where parents work versus where they live. We have many single-parent families where Mom or Dad has two jobs. For practical reasons, these parents seek alternatives because they're trying to juggle a lot of responsibilities.

MPR: How about the organization and administrative structure of Maine schools? Is that working?

Albanese: Maine has a large number of small schools that we want to protect because they are one of the reasons we perform so well relative to other states. Yet we have a large number of school boards whose jurisdictions need to be examined. Arguably, the School Administrative Districts (SADs) have worked in Maine. They are very efficient operations financially. Kids perform well. Their boards function at a more regional level versus every community trying to do similar things, often resulting in duplications. I think we need to maintain our small schools and our relationships between schools and communities, but move our policy-making process to a more regional level. To me, this reorganization would have real benefits with the added caveat that every school continues to have a governance/advisory presence in the community. For example, Massachusetts and some other states use school councils to maintain a community connection despite more regional policy-making boards.

MPR: Should we be concerned about violence in our schools?

Albanese: There is a view that national trends showing increased violence in schools don't include Maine. But we are not untouched. Verbal, physical, and sexual harassment are very much a part of our schools and, unfortunately, these incidents are on the rise. Incidents happen on school buses, in school corridors, behind the scenes. For the youngsters on the receiving end, school is not a good place to go. Unfortunately, the statistics in Maine are troubling.

I meet periodically with a group called ALANA [African-Latinola-Asian-Native American]. This group is made up of representatives of Maine's minority people. These are people who have been successful in their lives and are concerned about Maine and its ability to accept changing times and the color and complexion of our state. In particular, they are very concerned about the growing violence directed toward targeted groups. Many believe Maine lacks diversity, that we're all white, but we have great diversity in other ways and our complexion is changing. For instance, kids coming from forty-three different native languages attend the Portland schools.

MPR: What can schools do?

Albanese: It's about education and learning. There needs to be an adequacy of teaching about civil rights and ethical and responsible behaviors. Schools have moved away from these topics out of fear of being perceived as teaching values. We've become so sterile and worried that we might infringe on someone else's beliefs that we've probably gone too far, been too scared. But the incidents of violence are bringing concerned people out of the woodwork. They are starting to mobilize. We need to move forward on this issue.

MPR: Leadership of public education is important throughout the country. How is Maine doing?

Albanese: People are not aspiring to be superintendents and principals, so we have a leadership crisis. Recently in a neighboring district, there was only one applicant for school superintendent. At Deering High School earlier this year only four people applied for the principal's position. The same thing occurred at Cony High School, except there were seven applicants. I talk with

teachers who say, "I see what that person has to put up with. I don't want any part of it." This is a scary issue. ***Who will be our administrators and teachers ten years from now?*** The success of Learning Results will be determined, in part, by our ability to maintain a high quality and capacity of leadership.

I have told superintendents that I'm concerned about their time and how they spend it. Are they overly consumed by the budget? Are they engaging enough in the educational literature? Today we need leaders who can be astute managers of resources, as well as visionary leaders of educational reform and improvement.

I've suggested to some school superintendents that they look at the whole educational system and carve out two areas of expertise. The first is certifying what children need for knowledge and skills when they leave the system. What do they need to complete the transition to the work place or college? The second area of expertise relates to when we induct children into the system. We need to be specialists in early childhood education.

J. Duke Albanese has served as Maine's Commissioner of Education since August 1996. Prior to being named commissioner, he served as superintendent of schools for the communities of Belgrade, Oakland, Sidney, and Rome.

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