

# **The Long Conversation**

**or,**

## **“It’s hard, but worth it. Did I mention that it’s hard?”**

### **RSU 2 Student-Centered Learning Implementation Case Study**

*Kennebec Intra-District Schools (KIDS RSU, or RSU 2) was consolidated on July 1, 2009, and brought together the schools of four school districts and five towns – Dresden, Farmingdale, Hallowell, Monmouth and Richmond. Traveling between the district’s two most distant points, Dresden Elementary School and the Henry L. Cottrell Elementary School in Monmouth, takes you a distance of nearly 25 miles and shows you the east bank of the Kennebec River and the winding roads of central Maine’s Five Lakes region. The district has an enrollment of around 2,200. It contains three high schools – Hall-Dale High School, Monmouth Academy and Richmond High School – three middle schools, and four elementary schools. School sizes vary considerably.*

*Though the consolidation of RSU 2 occurred as it did for a number of complex reasons, one reason this set of towns and districts chose to tie their lot together was that each felt they would be able to maintain the individual characters of their schools and reflect the individual characters of their towns. Simultaneously, though, in matters of vision and policy, the district has striven to act fairly and equitably as one. Most significantly, the RSU 2 School Board adopted on January 5, 2011, a vision statement that focused on student-centered learning<sup>1</sup>. This vision, according to Curriculum Coordinator Chris Chamberlain, has worked to create common cause among the towns and unify the district in its educational vision.*

*This case study, funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, is an examination of how RSU 2 reached the point of articulating that vision and how it has worked to implement it since. For this case study, 30 teachers, administrators and parents were interviewed in March and April of 2012. The intended audience of this study is made*

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<sup>1</sup> A number of phrases are used to designate the instructional practices discussed in this website and in these case studies, including "standards-based," "performance-based" and "competency-based," as well as "customized learning" and "student-centered." For the most part in these case studies and web pages, we use our preferred term "proficiency-based education." But we include the other designations in direct quotes or within a primary source document and do not intend any specific distinction by our use of these terms.

*up of educators who are exploring a shift to a student-centered educational system and who are seeking examples of how implementation of such a system has unfolded for one district.*

*Disclosure: The author of this study was employed from 2000 to 2009 by MSAD 16, one of the predecessor districts incorporated into RSU 2, as a teacher at Hall-Dale High School. During his first year, he was placed on the Standards-Based Report Card committee at the high school. Later, he served in leadership positions on the District Curriculum Leadership Team and on the Standards Based Reporting Implementation Team.*

## **The Vision**

Approving the district vision statement in January 2011 was, by all measures, a vital landmark in the district’s journey towards student-centered learning. The vision statement itself is brief:

*The vision of RSU 2 is to be a system of student-centered learning.*

Adopted with the vision statement was a list of eight indicators. According to the list, “student-centered learning”:

- Embraces student voice and choice through varied learning opportunities that occur year-round and take place inside, as well as outside of schools; project-based learning, internships, experiential learning, career technical education, peer learning, technology and apprenticeships.
- Shows students learn in a variety of environments, from a variety of sources, and at different paces based on individual learning needs.
- Presents opportunities for students to analyze and think critically, write and speak effectively, and collaboratively solve complex problems today and in the future.
- Includes the community and its resources as an important part of the learning process.
- Integrates a rigorous, focused curriculum with instruction and standards-linked assessments.
- Enables students to clearly understand what they should know and be able to do as a result of their learning.
- Incorporates demonstrations as well as traditional tests to measure when a student has mastered the skills and content, thus providing an accurate gauge of how well students are learning and when advancement to the next stage is appropriate.

- Develops in the learner a sense of self-worth, cultural awareness, and ethical and social responsibility.
- Ensures that students are able to set goals, manage time and demonstrate an effective work ethic.

The vision and the description were the direct product of almost a year's work by the district's Ad Hoc Committee for Shared Vision, created in February 2010. In April 2010 this committee hosted 100 stakeholders in a shared visioning meeting. The meeting was held in Augusta – a “neutral location,” according to Chamberlain. The 2009-2010 year was set as the district's “visioning year,” she recalled. 20 to 25 people from each of the towns gathered to have discussions around the questions of *what school is like*, *what school should be like*, and *what learners should know and be able to do*. Five other meetings in the towns followed, ultimately involving approximately 250 people.

The location of the first meeting had to be “neutral” because, as important as it was to move toward the student-centered model of education, it was just as important to bring the district together under a single goal – to create the educational vision of RSU 2. The consolidation of RSU 2 was contentious, partly for reasons that plagued all of the consolidations carried out during Gov. Baldacci's 2007-2008 push to reorganize and consolidate the state's school districts. Partly, though, it was a product of the specific politics of the towns involved. In particular, some people in Monmouth and Richmond worried that their schools would be “absorbed” by Hall-Dale, a fear that gained credence when Hall-Dale Superintendent Don Siviski was hired as superintendent for the new Regional School Unit. Siviski brought to the RSU 2 school board a vision for student-centered learning that was new for two-thirds of that group, but it reflected a conversation that had been going on in Hall-Dale for nine years, at least.

## **The Long Conversation**

At Hall-Dale Elementary School, in 1999, the district had put in place a “standards-based report card” for grades one through five. “It was actually more standards-referenced rather than standards-based,” said Chris Chamberlain, who was impressed to see the report card when she started as principal of the elementary school in 2003, “but it did have all of the standards listed. Parents knew students didn't get a “math grade” but knew specifically what they were doing in math and how they were doing on each standard.” The standards were the Maine *Learning Results*, and the effort was partially spurred on by the belief that – as stipulated in the 1997 legislation that established the *Learning Results* – schools would be required to certify that students were demonstrating proficiency in those standards.

A short time later, Stephen MacDougall, then Hall-Dale High School's principal, formed an ad hoc, action-research team tasked with looking into the viability of bringing standards-based reporting to Hall-Dale High School. This team was one of a number of teams looking into progressive ideas – e.g., student-led conferences and advisor/advisee systems – that were being discussed around the state at the time. The meetings of the standards-based report card committee were deeply conflicted, ranging from

discussions of logistics to deep philosophical conversations to outright shouting matches. The team produced a standards-based report card that, in the words of team chair, teacher Russ Schneider, “went nowhere.” That wasn’t entirely true; for the high school, it was the beginning of the conversation.

In 2002, the conversation continued as Don Siviski was brought in as superintendent of MSAD 16. Siviski, who had implemented standards-based reporting in his previous position in Dover-Foxcroft, was a firm believer in proficiency-based, student-centered education. A number of participants in this study cite conversations with Siviski as being the first time they’d thought seriously about what a true standards-based system might look like. Steve Lavoie, current principal of Hall-Dale High School, said, “The first time I heard about this was when I met Don, when I was coming here nine years ago. He talked about a report card that wasn’t just something you put on a fridge. It would cover the fridge and the walls of the kitchen because it gave so much detail about what a student knows when they’re through with their program...[a report card] that documented progress through specific standards over a whole career of K-12 education.” Chamberlain remembers a similar early conversation in which Siviski asked her to imagine a school in which students advanced according to proficiency, rather than age.

In his first year, Siviski created the District Curriculum Leadership Team (DCLT) and the eight related content area teams. Every teacher in the district was required to serve on one of the content area teams, and each team chose a chair to serve on the DCLT. This body – with its own budget – became the venue and mechanism for all district curriculum work and became the locus of conversation around standards-based practice in the district. The DCLT, led by Chamberlain, led the district through the state’s Local Assessment System mandate, and, after the moratorium on that initiative, led the district in the writing of K-12 curricula in all eight content areas. The DCLT also provided professional development in practices that support a standards-based system, including rubric writing, assessment development and double scoring. They also led conversations in the district around “burning questions.” What does it mean to meet a standard? What is the meaning of “mastery/proficiency?” What type of evidence would be sufficient and necessary to demonstrate mastery or proficiency? What quantity? What does it mean to exceed a standard? These were some of the very foundational questions being mulled over.

A series of workshop days devoted to standards-based practice followed. Jeff Valance – who had been dean of students at Foxcroft Academy when that school implemented standards-based reporting – made the ethical case for standards-based reporting and against the averaging of grades. This, 2005, was the first time the entire staff heard an argument for the “moral imperative” of standards-based work. Many faculty members found themselves being persuaded. Some members of the school board were at that workshop. In 2006, a number of teachers from throughout the district attended professional development in standards-based reporting with Ken O’Connor, author of *A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 Fixes for Broken Grades*. Throughout this period, the DCLT and content-area teams worked regularly toward an understanding of standards-based reporting. In the summer of 2006, a small group of high school teachers formed an ad

hoc committee with administrative support to determine what next steps might be necessary in bringing standards-based reporting to the high school.

Meanwhile, Siviski was bringing the school board along. Board members were comfortable with standards-based reporting in the elementary school and even in the middle school. The high school, as high schools everywhere, was an especially sensitive issue. Siviski regularly assigned readings at board meetings. A presentation based on Valance's ideas was given at a public information session.

At one point, Siviski realized that the teachers had gotten too far ahead. At a workshop in which 60 teachers answered the questions of six board members, supporters of standards-based practice argued passionately for the new system. Dan Crocker, a sixth grade teacher, stood up and asked the board members, "Please, let us do this." Siviski remembered his argument, "It is unethical [said Crocker,] for me to give a parent a single letter grade when I can give them eight to nine pieces of data about how their student is doing in each of four areas of the standards of mathematics and give them seven or eight things about what's happening in the classroom....Ethically, I cannot go back to the old system." Still, the board would not let Siviski proceed. "They knew we hadn't engaged the parents and that we had to do that. So I held back the teachers."

The fact that the community hadn't been engaged was demonstrated at a meeting in May 2008 held in the Hall-Dale High School auditorium about the new system of reporting being proposed for the high school. Administrators had invited the admissions directors from Colby College and the University of Maine system to address parent concerns about college acceptance. Also invited was Gregg Palmer, then principal of Searsport High School, who had implemented standards-based reporting and an aggressive interventions program with much success. The meeting was contentious from the beginning and became angry enough that it is still remembered by some participants in this study as "that meeting." Parents in attendance argued fiercely and emotionally against the change, objecting that – despite the presence of two admissions directors on the stage telling them otherwise – the new system would disadvantage their children in obtaining scholarships and competitive college entrance. They also argued that removing competition from school – i.e., measuring students against standards rather than each other – would leave them unprepared for "the real world."

This meeting was seen as the beginning of distrust between the administration and parents. Some parents suggest that this meeting marks the time when the administration went "underground" with its implementation. One parent, who was not at the meeting but participated heavily in implementation soon after, said, "If I had to diagnose the whole thing, I would say that was the beginning of the end in terms of collaboration. I think people lost faith and trust. I think the administrators and many teachers felt like this was the right thing, and they were going do it."

## **The Standards-Based Reporting Implementation Team**

Because of the tumult, according to Siviski, the board and administration took a more systematic approach to community involvement during the following year. Central to this was a new ad hoc committee, the Standards-Based Reporting Implementation Team (SBRIT). The team was made up of administrators, teachers and parents. This team had three tasks. First, they were to draft recommended policies around grading and graduation requirements. Second, they were to discuss, research and make recommendations about unresolved issues such as honor role, eligibility and transcripts for college. Third, they were to help the district navigate through the process of informing and involving the larger community.

Coming in the wake of “that meeting,” serving on the team had an emotional impact that surprised its participants. The work took its toll. All parties engaged, but the tension was constant. The parents reported feeling dismissed and disrespected. The work of the team was foundational – what is education for *our kids?* – and very emotional. Reflecting the feelings of several participants, one parent member said, “I think it changed my life, being on that team. For me, it was very draining. I worked hard. There was a lot of conflict and a lot of hard stuff to work through all the time....I was very engaged in this. I feel like it did affect my personal, professional life, and my family.” Some meetings went very well, others very badly. One parent remembers “one horrible meeting where I was emotionally in tears, which really struck me. It was intense. It was an intense experience.”

Despite the level of unease felt among parents on the team, teachers and administrators – one teacher said, “I felt like the parents could not understand where teachers were coming from, and maybe the teachers couldn’t understand where the parents were coming from” – the group managed to function at a high level. Policies were written early and forwarded to the school board for consideration. To address the question of college admissions, the parents on the committee surveyed college admissions directors from a variety of colleges and universities, who uniformly affirmed that the new reporting system would not disadvantage students, as long as the system was clearly explained. A public information meeting was organized, which, in contrast to “that meeting,” went very well. Finally, SBRIT participated in two working sessions with the school board and the DCLT, presenting recommendations that were the result of lengthy, difficult conversations.

## **From Standards-Based to Student-Centered**

When Russ Schneider commented that standards-based reporting “went nowhere” in those early days, he immediately qualified it by saying, “and it’s probably a good thing, considering what we know now.” The early work at Hall-Dale was centered on standards-based reporting, with the idea that if the reporting system was transparently reporting student proficiency on specific standards, then teachers would *have to* change their practice to address these transparent needs, and parents would be able to support their kids in meeting these needs. Steve Lavoie described it as a shallow approach to a

deep problem. “I always thought the big change was going from a 0-100 scale to a 1-4 scale, and not averaging,” he said. “I thought that was a huge jump, but that's just a reporting system. It's nothing compared to student-centeredness. As difficult as it was to make that change in reporting, the change to student-centered learning was a much deeper, second-order philosophical shift.”

The awareness of the necessity and virtues of this “deeper, second-order” change emerged in May of 2009, in a barn converted into a bed and breakfast in Hermon, Maine. The Maine Department of Education had sent out invitations to school districts, inviting them to a four-day workshop. At this meeting, then-education commissioner Susan Gendron and educational researcher Robert Marzano introduced a group of consultants from Alaska who had developed a model of education that promised to be transforming for the schools of Maine.

The MSAD 16 team was unfamiliar with the Reinventing Schools Coalition (RISC) but was hopeful that the state would support its move toward standards-based practice. Rather than reforming one structural element – the reporting system – RISC offered a model that transformed the culture of the school, from the classroom to the school board to the community. Speakers talked about clear standards and standards-based practice. They also talked about students learning at their own pace, unattached to age-based grade levels. They talked about comprehensive vision-setting processes, distributed leadership and continuous improvement. They talked about multiple pathways and anytime/anywhere learning. Not one of these concepts was a new idea to RISC, but the model brought these ideas together in a way that hadn't been seen before.

One parent who attended with the MSAD 16 team wrote that she felt the conference was “generally excellent. I learned a great deal and the presentations were very good. It was especially helpful to hear from students about how they manage their learning. It was also helpful to see how the notebooks and software played a critical role in how students managed their academic subjects and set goals regarding their achievement.” Further, she had private discussions with some facilitators and “felt they were earnest about the approach but honest about the challenges of making the transition.” Other participants remember vividly hearing teachers and students discuss day-to-day practice and realizing that this was not only a good idea, but also one that could be executed.

Chris Chamberlain was not convinced at that meeting that RISC provided the best path, though she said, “I was curious. When something came up in the fall for administrators, I went. Simultaneously, there was a session for teachers. So, some teachers went to that, and that was exciting. That's when you began to get the moral imperative, ‘Why should we change?’ That was very good.” It began a “grass roots” period for the district. “As soon as someone went to a training, I had their friends calling me, ‘When can I go to a training?’ I constantly had waiting lists for people wanting to go to what we called ‘the RISC training.’ So that was 2009 and 2010.” The cost of this training was a heavy concern, but Chamberlain and Siviski decided to divert all Title IIA professional development funds for that year – the first year of the federal ARRA stimulus – to the RISC trainings.

## Year One

In June 2009, the MSAD 16 school board voted, unanimously, to change the grading to a standards-based reporting system, implementing it in the high school one year at a time. On June 30, MSAD 16 ceased to exist. On July 1, Kennebec IntraDistrict Schools (RSU 2) came into being. Nearly a decade after they had first begun discussing the ideas around standards-based practice, year one began.

Don Siviski remembered, “We started the summer with a retreat, and we had the administrators and the 12 members of the board in attendance. They were asked to read Tony Wagner's *Global Achievement Gap*, and we had a facilitator lead our discussion.” Siviski presented the ideas behind student-centered learning in their essentials – time is the variable, learning the constant; anytime, anywhere learning; 21st century skills – and made an argument for moving the entire district in that direction. “At the end of our seven-hour retreat dinner, the board unanimously said, ‘This is the only way we should be going, we will embrace standards-based education, and we need our curriculums documented and we'd like all our towns to be moving in this direction. So administrators, we'd like to have goals and activities that help RSU 2 get to that point.’ We were gassed that we could have 12 members willing to lead after only having known each other for one retreat!”

Board member Jim Grandahl remembered that retreat: “We looked at the data. And we saw that our schools were doing pretty well in the state, but...that was like being the best of the worst. Even our best were only reaching 55 percent [proficiency]. So, Don presented this as, ‘Here’s the problem, and here’s a possible way to move ahead.’” The board voted to move ahead, according to Grandahl, but he offered this disclaimer: “I’m very carefully saying that we were not voting that we would become a RISC school, or that RISC was the right blueprint for us. We voted unanimously that we had to change. RISC presented a promising path for that. If what we’ve been doing for the last 30 years has only taken us this far, then we’re going to do something else.” Grandahl applied a sports analogy: given the past records of the schools, in joining a new RSU, the schools would be “under a new coach, learning a new offense.”

Chris Chamberlain agreed that it was an important distinction to make. “RISC is one model among a bunch. We were developing our instructional model, and we used RISC to help us do that.” Where RISC added the most value, according to Chamberlain, was in providing trainings that established the moral imperative – communicating why it was essential to change practice – and providing tools that allowed teachers to alter the culture of their classrooms, moving from a professorial model of teaching to a facilitator or coach model. The two trainings that provided this were the *Understanding the Model* workshop and the *Classroom Design and Delivery* workshop (aka, CDD or Beacon training). Between November 2009 and June 2010, while the board and the superintendent concentrated on consolidating the RSU, all administrators and around 50 teachers took the *Understanding the Model* training, with somewhat fewer taking the *CDD* training. Even though the teachers had been warned that returning to the district and enthusing about the training might be off-putting, word got around. One middle school teacher remembers being told not to talk about it by the trainer, that it

would just be better to start changing things in the classroom and waiting for other teachers to notice, “but people asked. So I shared.” One teacher was so energized by what she said that he started implementing the ideas in his classroom immediately. “He dived in pretty quickly. Quicker than me, and I was pretty quick.”

Year one, then, was a year of slowly building capacity by providing “RISC training” to teachers who were interested, increasing the knowledge of the board, and through conversations at the building level starting to plant seeds in all the towns of the RSU. Rick Amero, principal at Monmouth Academy, remembered the previous principal, Scott Bell, leading discussions in faculty meetings on the problems with averaging grades, the practice of giving zeroes for late work and the separation of work ethic and behavior from academic achievement in reporting. In each town, a formal curriculum review structure was put in place – teams to meet regularly and discuss curriculum issues – and an RSU-wide curriculum leadership structure coordinated the work. Deb Emery, principal of the Henry Cottrell School in Monmouth, began leading discussions at faculty meetings about these same issues and encouraged book and study groups. Her staff was energized.

As chaotic as it may have felt, having the consolidation of the RSU and the movement toward student-centered learning occurring simultaneously may have worked to the advantage of the district. The new beginning that was marked by the arrival of RISC meant that all of the towns of the district – all the schools, their administrators and teachers – were engaging in this new learning together. Similarly, the adoption of student-centered learning gave the new district a concrete educational vision that would guide all of its actions.

## **Year Two**

In August of 2010, the administration sought to press the issue with faculty. The district placed all of its workshop days at the beginning of the year and held a district-wide, three-day *Understanding the Model* training for all personnel. The goal was to have a commitment vote on the third day of training. The 50 faculty members who had already had the training went ahead to CDD training. On the third day, at lunch, the vote was held. Should the district continue forward in the direction of standards-based, student-centered learning? Chris Chamberlain arranged for one teacher from each building to count votes. Rich Delorenzo, the director of RISC, had told the administration that no school district had ever received more than 70 percent to vote affirmatively for the change. The vote counters returned from the library to the cafeteria to report 83.3 percent.

Chris Chamberlain remembered, “It was a big deal. The crew from the Reinventing Schools Coalition had told us, ‘You have to take this vote. You have to know that the teachers are behind it, because the work is so difficult.’ And we agreed. Right after lunch on the third day, we had ballots. They were given a rubric of six columns, going from ‘Completely in Favor’ to ‘I have my doubts, I don’t think this is good for kids.’ So we thought, if we get the top four, we’d be OK. The fourth was ‘I think I can buy into

this, but I need a lot more information.’ So, big drum roll...and it came back at 83.3 percent voting to do this change. And the place went wild. It was probably the most emotional moment of an educational career.”

For Don Siviski, it was a landmark moment balancing out the landmark moment of “that meeting.” It was an “expression of the unity of the professionals in the district.” Other participants agreed, one saying, understatedly, “It was cool,” another actually tearing up as she described the vote. Every participant, when asked, had a vivid memory of “the vote,” and recognized it as pivotal.

This set the tone for the 2010-2011 school year. Once again, all professional development money went toward training faculty in proficiency-based, student-centered learning. This included universal training in *Classroom Design and Development* and widespread training in the higher levels of RISC training, *Instructional Design and Development* (aka, IDD, or Advanced Beacon) and *Guide* training. The district also invited Bea McGarvey, coauthor with Chuck Schwahn, of the book *Inevitable*, which presented its own model of student-centered learning. McGarvey focused on instructional strategies, assessment and leadership. McGarvey’s trainings complemented the RISC work in providing teachers ways to bring these ideas into the classroom, and explored more deeply ideas around formative assessment.

A number of teachers felt that this work was most meaningful to them. One veteran elementary teacher, felt like she was “finding old friends. It fits how I believe education should be.” A middle school teacher said, “I never wanted to be a stand-and-deliver teacher. That’s never the way I wanted to teach, but I didn’t really have the skills to facilitate learning the way I do now. And I have to give credit to the RISC training. It gives you processes to do what you want to do. They’ve got a lot of good processes.”

As the capacity of the faculty was developed, and the vision was crafted, some mandates did come from the administration. At one point, faculty members were asked simply to start using at least one of the RISC tools in their classroom. Administrators would do walkthroughs looking for standard operating procedures, codes of conduct, parking lots or other evidence. Much of this centered on the idea of increasing “voice and choice” in their classrooms, i.e., creating avenues or mechanisms for student feedback (voice) and allowing students to decide how they might demonstrate proficiency in any given standard (choice).

One teacher at Monmouth Academy recalled faculty meetings discussing voice and choice. Teachers would ask questions about certain practices, and other teachers would raise their hands to say, “Well, I already do this in my room. C’mon and check it out.” This teacher said, “The overriding message [from administration] was, ‘You’re doing this in your classroom already, but what we’re going to do is give you more tools and more thoughts and inspiration as to how you can continue to develop these ideas where the student shows you the learning rather than you showing how they [should] learn.’ You know, the sort of ‘show me that you know it, and not just with the three of four narrow things I say because that might not be your jam,’ so to speak.”

Even after the vote in August and the concomitant glow it cast over the district's work, there was some wariness among teachers and administration. Looking ahead to the amount of work involved could provoke trepidation. Some teachers – seeing themselves, correctly, as being good teachers – wondered what they would be giving up by taking on the new model. Teachers in Monmouth and Richmond feared a community backlash like the one that had happened in Hallowell; this never materialized, at least not at that level, according to teachers in those districts. Others wondered, if 83.3 percent voted for it, what about the 16.7 percent who did not? No special effort was made to court them – the ballot was secret – but the conversations continued, and all were invited.

They moved forward and did the training. Though the bulk of the professional development was provided in the 2010-2011 school year, the great professional development push culminated in December 2011, at which time 100 percent of faculty (except newly hired teachers) were trained at the CDD level. By April 2012, 40 percent of district teachers were trained at the IDD level, and approximately 30 staff had been trained even beyond to the Guide level.

In addition to this internal work, RSU 2 joined five other school districts in what came to be called the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning (MCCL). The RSU had declined to join the previous year (when it was initially referred to as “the RISC cohort”) because of the finance model the cohort was proposing and because they weren't sure if the work they were doing was truly aligned to the Cohort's goals or pace. “We worked with the cohort, we just didn't join,” said Chris Chamberlain. A year later, the six districts – RSU 2, RSU 18 (Messalonskee), RSU 57 (Massabesic), Milford, RSU 84 (Jackman), and RSU 15 (Gray/New Gloucester) – had aligned their interests and agreed to work cooperatively in order to 1) share resources, 2) share expertise and 3) increase the capacity in the state for customized learning. One of their first tasks was to work with Bea McGarvey and Marzano Research Laboratories to create a set of “measurement topics” and “learning targets” (building from the *Learning Results* and Common Core standards) that would represent a viable curriculum for student-centered learning. Teachers from all six districts, in the four core content areas, gathered for days in the 2010-2011 school year to write these “measurement topics.”

### **Year Three**

Don Siviski left RSU 2 at the end of the 2010-2011 school year in order to work at the Maine State Department of Education. To succeed him, the school board selected Virgel Hammonds, who had been principal of Lindsay High School, in Lindsay, CA. In his five years there, Hammonds had successfully brought the high school through a transition to a standards-based, student-centered model – a transition that has since extended to the entire Lindsay Unified School District. At Lindsay, Hammonds had worked closely with Robert Marzano, RISC and Bea McGarvey. Seeing “tremendous results” in Lindsay, a student population that was 100 percent economically disadvantaged and where 70 percent of the population was English language learners, Hammonds was invited in 2009 to come to Maine to speak at RSU 15 (Gray/New Gloucester). He was later invited

to come to RSU 2 to work for two days with the administrative team on leadership (“How do you inspire and empower folks to make this change?”). When Don Siviski announced he was leaving, Hammonds submitted his application for the position.

By choosing Hammonds, the RSU 2 board brought in the leader with the experience that could, most logically, take the district on its next steps. They also, just by the fact of the hiring, declared their continued commitment to student-centered learning. In the interview, Hammonds made it clear to the board that, if they were not committed to pursuing student-centered learning, he was not interested in working for them.

Hammonds made three decisions early on that would shape the year. The first was that the district would adopt the measurement topics that had been developed by the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning. Hammonds felt it absolute necessary for the district to have a clear curriculum. Otherwise, how could teachers possibly know what they should be doing, or how well they were doing it? How could administrators and the board guide the educational mission of the district? RSU 2 did not have such a curriculum, though some of its constituent districts did. The trouble was that the Cohort had taken longer to produce the measurement topics than had been anticipated. Thus, the measurement topics themselves were less well developed than they might have hoped. Nevertheless, Hammonds felt it was necessary to implement immediately. “It was interesting,” said Hammonds, “that many of the teachers I talked to could not identify the standards they taught to. That’s not a new concept. That’s 30 years old. Identify standards. Teach to the standards. The *Learning Results* have been around since 1997. I said, ‘We just can’t have that.’ It’s not that teachers weren’t working hard. They were. But the majority of the work they were doing was not tied to standards. And I understand that the measurement topics had holes. Well, we weren’t teaching to any standards before. But our team will be working on them to fill those holes.”

The measurement topics were supposed to have descriptors written for student performance that matched work described as partially meeting the standard (otherwise known as level 2 on a four-point scale), meeting the standard (or level 3), and exceeding the standard (level 4). Only the (3) levels – “proficiency” – had been written. In addition, the measurement topics had only been drafted in four core content areas: ELA, math, social studies and science. The other four – visual and performing arts, world and modern languages, health and physical education, and career and education development – were a year away. RSU 2 teachers in those areas would have to write their own standards for the year.

Also, the measurement topics had re-conceptualized the scoring levels, bringing them into line with a cognitive taxonomy – similar to Bloom’s taxonomy – created by Marzano Research Laboratories. Rather than (3) being “meets the standards,” and (2) and (4) being “partially meets” and “exceeds,” respectively; (3) now meant demonstrating proficiency at a high level, while (2) meant demonstrating proficiency at a more basic level. In other words, instead of describing levels toward (or beyond) success toward meeting the standard, the new scale described levels of sophistication in working with the measurement topic. One high school teacher explained it to parents at conferences:

*Don't let the (1), (2), (3), (4) confuse you. Let me explain it this way. A (1) level question would be 'You know the capitol of Maine is Augusta, right?' A level (2) would be 'What is the capitol of Maine? Augusta.' Level (3) is 'Why is Augusta the capitol of Maine?' And level (4) would be 'What if the capitol of Maine was moved to Bangor? How would that change the state?' That really helped people understand it's the complexity, it's not the knowledge. The knowledge is pretty much the same, but it's how you use that knowledge.*

It was a subtle shift redefining terms that parents and teachers thought they understood. It added to the stress of teachers doing many new things, and it contributed to parents' sense that they were disconnected from the process. Though many teachers came to feel that the new scale made much more sense – in fact, was clearer than the old scale – the fact of the change caused frustration.

More difficult than either of these issues, though, was the fact that the teachers would be getting the measurement topics only days before they were to be teaching them.

The second decision made was that, along with the new measurement topics, the district would implement a new online reporting system – called *Educate* – that allowed reporting and tracking of proficiency achievement that, according to many in the district, no other grading software could. The MCCL had contracted with developer Scott Bacon to create a version of the software that suited Maine's needs, and he had. But – as with the measurement topics – RSU 2 was the only district going live with it in the 2011-2012 school year.

A system based in standards and operating with a student-centered model needs such software if it is not to “fall under the weight of its own paper.” Also, as Mary Helen Williams, Principal of Dresden Elementary School and the Marcia Buker Elementary School in Richmond, put it, “one of the most important things about the standards-based approach is how visible it is, in theory. Parents can get on *Educate* and see what's going on. Kids can get on. I can get on. If you didn't have that system, and you've got these paper copies of report cards and such...it's too cumbersome.” With new standards it made sense, according to Hammonds, to begin to use the new software, rather than entering them into the old student information system or running a paper system for a year. This decision has meant that as the RISC professional development push came to an end, the district had to focus on *Educate* training. Few feel that the training has been adequate. Each building has teachers designated as trainers, but there simply hasn't, according to some, been the time provided for teachers to move beyond using the software at its most basic level.

The third decision was to implement standards-based reporting – along with the measurement topics – in Monmouth Academy and Richmond High School in all four grades simultaneously, rather than phasing it in one grade at a time, as had been done at Hall-Dale High School. According to Principal Rick Amero, at Monmouth Academy, it was students – in facilitated conversations – who said that it made no sense for the school to try and run a dual system (traditional methods for upperclassmen and student-centered for underclassman). If the school is going to make the change, then it

should make the change. One teacher at Hall-Dale was envious of the decision. Hall-Dale has been running a dual system for three years, said this teacher, and “I don’t think anyone understood the cost to teachers, in terms of time and effort, of running both systems simultaneously. A tremendous amount of work.”

In the face of the demands of the year, teachers persisted. By March, the “whirlwind” had begun to settle down, but morale amongst the teachers remained fairly low. Yes, they were doing this because they believed in it, but also, said a number of administrators and teachers, because it was required. This was a theme raised by a number of participants, including those who supported the decisions made by the administration. One teacher said she was looking forward to next year because she wasn’t feeling “especially competent” that year. Another said, with something of a laugh, that he was looking forward to next year because, “I’ll know what the hell I’m doing.” Teachers in all schools – and administrators – made it clear that they felt as if they were right at the edge of their capacities. A number of teachers indicated that they were working as hard as they could ever remember working but also feeling they were doing better work than they ever thought they could. “It’s hard, but it’s worth it,” one high school teacher said earnestly, “Did I mention that it’s hard?”

### **Check and Adjust**

In June of 2012, RSU 2 graduated its first group of seniors with standards-based scores on their report card and transcript. These students will be at Monmouth Academy and Richmond High School. In June of 2013, the first group of seniors at Hall-Dale will graduate from a standards-based system. The entire district will, on paper, be operating a standards-based, student-centered model. This is a landmark achievement to some, but no one has been under the illusion that the district is finished. Asked to gauge the movement of the district, Hall-Dale Principal Steve Lavoie allowed, “We’ve made considerable progress.” Monmouth Academy Principal Rick Amero drew an imaginary line marking a spectrum between a totally traditional system and a completely student-centered system. He placed RSU 2 about a quarter of the way toward student-centered. “Last year was entirely the old system—zero to 100. The staff has been wonderful. They are being challenged every single day. I feel like we’re in the middle of a tornado, but when we reflect and see how far we’ve come, we really have taken huge steps and are having some level of success. That’s the part that I’m proud of. People have come together as a team, embracing standards-based education.”

One thing that has made progress possible, according to teachers and administrators, has been the district enthusiastically embracing a “check and adjust” philosophy as a stance toward change. The phrase came out of the common organizational model referred to as *Plan-Do-Check-Adjust* (sometimes *Act*), and is amplified by the RISC pillar of *continuous improvement*. Through the year, the district aggressively evaluated progress, and as soon as something seemed to be going badly, adjusted course. The most prominent example of this was in the response to the “student-paced” mantra of much student-centered theory. The idea was that all learn at a different pace, and no student should be penalized for that. Unfortunately, to paraphrase one parent, no

educational model will change what it means to be 14 years old. Immediately upon enacting “student-paced” at Hall-Dale, students began falling behind, putting work off until the end of the trimester or year, and feeling justified in doing so. It was alarming enough that in November, the administration and teachers changed the rule to “teacher-paced or faster.” Students could work at the pace the teacher set, or move ahead as they saw fit, but falling behind would mean the student was directed toward interventions. It would also have implications for eligibility and honor role. This shift in policy addressed one of the most frequently voiced concerns of parents, that there were no deadlines, and also gave teachers more leverage in their rooms to direct instruction.

“Check and adjust” has become part of the culture in RSU 2. A number of participants indicated directly that they “love” check and adjust. “It gives you permission to try things, and it gives you permission to fail,” said one high school math teacher. “We tell kids that mistakes are a part of learning. That’s true for us, too.” One of the earliest RISC tools, the Parking Lot – which facilitates direct feedback from students – feeds into “check and adjust.” One high school teacher has set up a policy of class meetings in his room. “Every once in a while – or if something seems to be going wrong – we’ll close the door, sit on the desks, and have a safe conversation. ‘What’s going wrong, folks? What needs to change?’” As the year has progressed, students have come to expect a voice in the conversation.

In one example at Monmouth Academy, students approached the administration. They felt the pace was too quick. They were falling behind and panicking. According to Rick Amero, “One kid came to us and said, ‘Look, can the teachers just stop moving ahead? Can they just stop for a couple of days?’ Another kid came to us and said, ‘I really want to move deeper into some things. Can we stop for a few days so I can do that?’ It was beautiful. One kid said, ‘You know I’m a procrastinator, and I’ve gotten myself in a mess.’” Teachers had a mixed reaction. “Some thought we were enabling them and they should be taking care of business, so tough luck. Others thought, ‘Y’know, we’ve changed all the rules on these kids.’ So we gave them the two days. In those classes, for the two days, the teachers didn’t teach anything new. The point of it was that the kids would try to meet a measurement topic, or a couple of measurement topics, during those two days. And if you’re OK in English, we work things out so you can go work on math. We brought in a couple of retired math teachers and sat them in the library. Kids going for the fours worked with the retired math teachers. Sometimes just hearing the information in a different way makes the difference. It was great. We got good feedback. This whole idea came from the kids.”

### **Continuing the Long Conversation**

The fact that *check and adjust* was embraced by the district didn’t eliminate the general unease felt by some teachers, students and parents. One teacher indicated that, like the students at Monmouth Academy, he would like to stop learning new stuff for just a little while, so he can master what he’s already taken on and “feel like a good teacher.” Another teacher indicated that, while she “loves” check and adjust, the specific adjustments aren’t always what she would choose. With the adoption of the

measurement topics, for example, and the mandate that specific teachers will be required to cover assigned topics, she felt the district had once again become curriculum-driven, rather than student-centered. The district revisited these assignments – at the request of teachers – and eased stress, but didn’t change the general feeling this teacher had that being required to follow an unfamiliar and demanding plan meant she was less responsive to individual students. She was hopeful that in the 2012-2013 school year, she would have a better grasp of the measurement topics and *Educate*, and once again act with more facility in her room.

Parents have also expressed varying levels of concern about the introduction of new elements this year. One parent, a supporter of the reforms, was nevertheless frustrated at the different levels of understanding that different teachers had of the measurement topics. She asked three different teachers what it meant to get a (4) and received three different answers. Principal Rick Amero mirrored this sentiment, acknowledging, “Consistency is still an issue. We need more professional development to make sure a (3) is a (3) is a (3) throughout the district.” Also, the roll out of *Educate* left many parents frustrated and confused. Training for parents was inadequate, this parent said, though she admitted that she didn’t know how the administration could successfully train parents beforehand. “Parents won’t show up to meetings.”

They have been showing up in principals’ offices, though. A number of administrators discussed spending hours with parents after the first *Educate* progress report was issued. Parents also continued to ask questions that have been asked since the beginning. What about college? What about honor roll? Why aren’t we averaging grades? Some were satisfied with the answers they received and left understanding the new system far better than if they’d attended a public meeting. Others, at a fundamental level, disagreed with the substance of the change. As Don Siviski said about the early work with MSAD 16, “There will always be people in the community who disagree with you, and there will always be people at step one of the process.” A small group of parents in Hallowell continued to express concern – at times, hostility – not about standards-based or student-centered education, but about what they see as poor implementation and an unresponsive administration. One parent, after talking with others about *Educate* and the measurement topics, felt that 2011-2012 was the most frustrating year of the transition thus far.

Virgel Hammonds is sympathetic to this complaint. “It’s hard for a parent to hear, ‘Give me a year or two, and we’ll fix that.’ Because their kid doesn’t have a year or two. The junior class has gone through three different shifts in how things are scored. And I come in and I look at rubric-based scores differently. So here they go, experiencing another change, a year from college. ‘Is this going to negatively impact them?’ I get why parents are concerned. These are legitimate concerns. A piece I share with parents, often, is that there are difficulties in any sort of second-order change. The key is to reflect on those and make adjustments as quickly as you can, for the best interest of all kids. No one at Hall-Dale or in the RSU ever implemented anything thinking, ‘I’m going to do this to mess up the kids.’ I’ve watched all staff working feverishly to do what’s right for all kids. And the key is *all kids*.”

Hammonds has attempted to foster trust by continuing to have the long conversation that began more than a decade ago. Hammonds said, when he arrived at RSU 2, “I needed to get to know the communities, the schools. What has made us successful? What hasn’t? What do we need to target? I made a commitment to go to every community. Homes. Patios. Barns. Town fairs.” One board member commented that, as far as he could tell, Hammonds hadn’t had a night off since September. Hammonds discussed what student-centered learning entailed. He understood that, even this far into the process, many people were encountering this information for the first time, and that they are genuinely surprised that school would be fundamentally different from what they remembered as children. “As simple as it seems to educators, that’s a tough one for parents to get past because that’s how we did school. That’s all we know. That score tells me what I know. It really was a learning process for our community to understand how that’s not a useful way to understand learning.” In some cases, it’s gone further than that, directly into curriculum. Twice, Hammonds has worked with businesses from Monmouth to develop community-centered projects that can be used to demonstrate proficiency on measurement topics. The most prominent of these was one in which students designed and built an outhouse for a small island conservancy in the district.

## **Expectation**

Many participants expressed a sense of expectation and “looking forward to next year.” There has been a sense that, with the measurement topics and *Educate* now in hand, they will be in a position to enact genuinely something that has felt like theory and pilot. As he contemplates the formidable task of setting up a master schedule that will allow for various groupings and re-groupings of kids according to readiness, rather than age-based grade levels, Steve Lavoie said, with some satisfaction, “We’ve talked the talk for a long time, now we’ll be walking the walk.”

In 2004, when discussing this shift with then-commissioner Sue Gendron, Don Siviski said he knew that a genuine shift would take at least 10 years and depended on the perseverance of the teachers and administrators involved. This may be why at every step the district has revisited the moral imperative of the movement, reminding themselves of why they’re doing it. Even the regular mention of “the vote” – 83.3 percent – is part of the attempt to keep eyes on the prize. “It’s so easy,” said Chris Chamberlain, “to start to feel that this is just something being imposed by the central office or by the state because the work is so hard.”

Aside from the perseverance of the faculty and administration, three things have been cited as essential for the success – thus far – of the shift. First, the coming in of the new RSU, despite the energy it took, created a sense that it was a sensible time to make a change. “We had to create a district vision, anyway. Why not this one?” said Don Siviski. Second, the superintendent and the administration had a vision very early on that sparked conversations that lasted for years and laid foundational pieces. When the opportunity of RISC came along, the district was well positioned to take advantage of it and “crystallize” that vision. One parent who attended the first RISC conference in

Hermon was surprised that she and the MSAD 16 team seemed to be much further along in both theory and experience than the other districts. Third, the staff, when presented the opportunity to move forward, took ownership of their own learning. “They,” said Chris Chamberlain, “were the ones who shared their enthusiasm with their colleagues and helped us get going.” This tension between the grassroots and the gardeners – the administration has a vision, and the teachers own their own enthusiasm – was powerful in RSU 2. The tension may rise at points – as with the mandating of the measurement topics – but leadership has seemed to follow a distributed model. Gardener or grassroots? It hasn’t been either/or, but both/and.

Moving forward has been RSU 2’s modus operandi, sometimes in the face of resistance, frustration or concern. Next year, the high schools will shift to “leveled” classrooms, meaning that courses will be organized according to ability levels in each of the standards, and that students will move between classes depending on their achievement level on a particular standard. This shift will be challenging, but it’s an essential part of student-centeredness. Both Rick Amero and Steve Lavoie took a deep breath when discussing the prospect of developing a master schedule that would allow movement of kids in math and ELA according to proficiency levels. “If we don’t make the change now,” said Steve Lavoie, “we’re another year from making that change. I don’t have that kind of patience.”

They will move forward. The long conversation has brought them here. They will check and adjust. The long conversation will continue.