

The Logical Next Step

RSU 57 Performance-Based Education Implementation Case Study

Regional School Unit 57 covers a large swatch of land west of Portland, almost to the New Hampshire border. It comprises the towns of Alfred, Limerick, Lyman, Newfield, Shapleigh and Waterboro. The district has historically been one of the larger in the state. Though the RSU officially came into being three years ago – as most did – the district had existed in its current form for years under the name MSAD 57. All that was required was the name change. (“We had to petition to keep our number,” said Curriculum Coordinator Lori Lodge.) The district has five elementary schools, ranging in size from approximately 160 students to 525 students. These elementary schools feed into Massabesic Middle School (around 800 students) and Massabesic High School (around 1030 students).

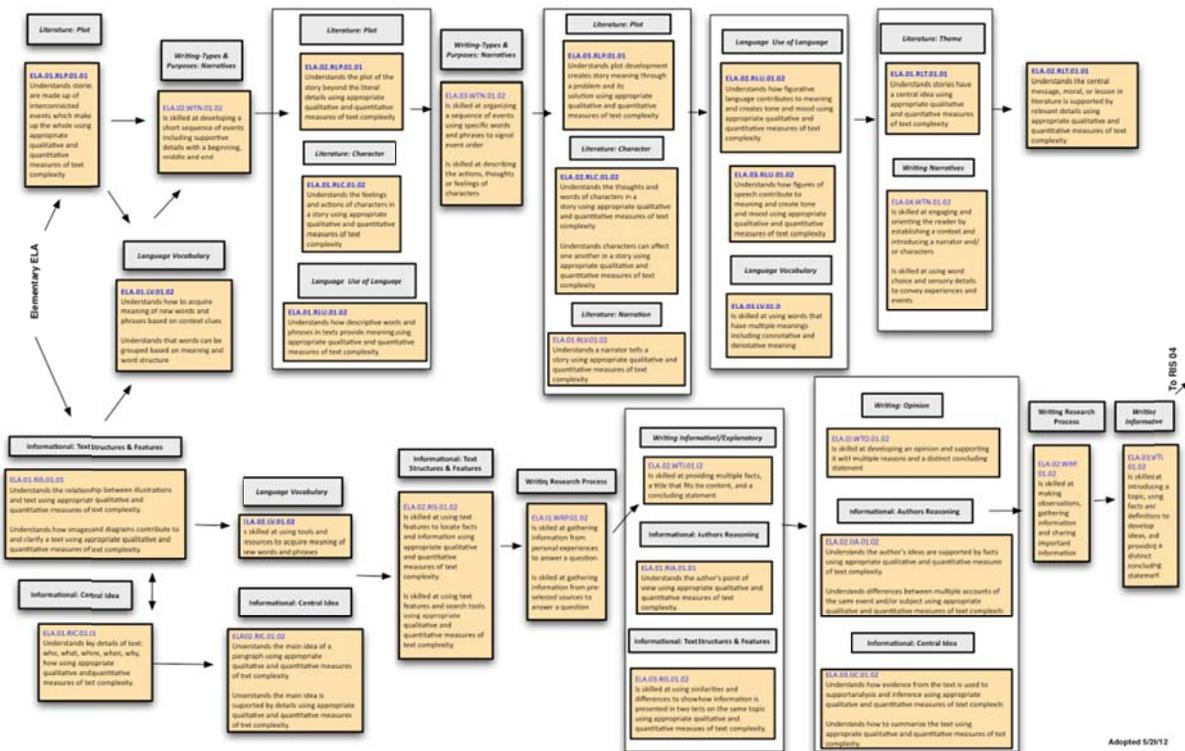
The perception within the district has been that they’ve done relatively well in terms of test scores over the years, despite perennial budget woes. Some years ago, however, the district decided “relatively well” was inadequate and embraced a path toward what they’ve termed “performance-based education¹.” The vision is based around the idea that, in education, time should not be the constant, learning should be, and around the idea that schools, ethically, are required to teach all kids, not just some, and not even most. By committing to these two philosophical shifts, RSU 57 committed to fundamental organizational change.

This case study, funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, is an exploration of how RSU 57 has been implementing this change. For this study, 19 administrators, teachers and parents were interviewed. The intended audience of this study is made 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.

¹ 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.

A Curriculum Without Age-Based Grade Levels

On May 23, 2012, Lori Lodge, curriculum coordinator for RSU 57, brought to the school board a curriculum map for its approval. The map spanned elementary, middle and high schools, and covered math, English language arts, social studies, and science, and it looked unlike any curriculum the board had seen before. Here is a one-page example:



Rather than a chart, aligning standards to particular grade levels or units of study, or a simple list of scope and sequence, the new curriculum presented a flow of achievement. The proficiencies to be mastered (called “measurement topics”) were broken down into graspable chunks (“learning targets”). Under “Writing: Research Process,” for example, a learning target read, “Is skilled at forming a research question, planning and conducting research to investigate a complex topic.” This learning target was placed in a sequence of learning targets that built upon one another and would lead the learner to proficiency in the larger measurement topic. Missing was any specificity around when each learning topic would be addressed. There were no notations of “grade four, third trimester” or the like, although broad boundaries – elementary, middle school – were recognized.

The ideas behind the curriculum are that every learner progresses at a different pace and that any curriculum that said something such as “all learners will be ready to learn pre-algebra in March of the sixth grade” would be inadequate. The vision was, in fact, a map of learning targets that each learner would navigate with the help of the teachers. The curriculum enacted the aphorism that “time is not the constant, learning is the constant.” Rather than having a series of trimesters or years that students move through, the curriculum showed a series of proficiencies that each learner would master before moving on to the next. It represented a key shift in the philosophical stance of RSU 57. No longer, said this vision, would you have learners who had already demonstrated a proficiency waiting around for the rest of the class to catch up. No longer would you have students who were struggling receive a failing grade and then move on because “it’s time for a different unit now.” Having been adopted, this philosophical shift became policy.

The process of adopting the policy was thoughtful and not contentious. Some months earlier, the board had asked John Davis to come in as interim superintendent, and, more recently, to continue in that role for the 2012-2013 year. Davis had implemented a proficiency-based system in the Bering Strait School District in Alaska and had been a presenter for the Reinventing Schools Coalition over the past few years. Hiring Davis, as much as anything else, communicated the board’s commitment to moving toward a proficiency-based, student-centered system. Adopting the proposed curriculum was the logical next step.

Board chair Karla Bergeron noted that the board, and specifically the curriculum committee, had been well educated on the topic of standards and performance-based education, and was firmly supportive. They had participated in trainings and reading groups for years. Different board members, of course, had different levels of understanding, but the vote was unanimous. The path leading to the adoption of this policy, however, was longer than the series of conversations leading to any single vote. It was as lengthy and intricate as the curriculum itself and featured teachers and administrators as learners, moving at different paces and following multiple pathways toward learning.

Hermon, Maine, May 2009

Though individual schools in RSU 57 had been exploring proficiency-based learning for some time, the district, as a whole, began walking this path in Hermon, Maine. In May 2009, three years before the adoption of the curriculum map, Lori Lodge, curriculum coordinator of MSAD 57, went to Hermon to hear the Maine Department of Education’s latest take on proficiency-based reform. She knew something big was happening because researcher Robert Marzano and then-commissioner Sue Gendron were speaking. She also knew that they were presenting a new model of proficiency-based, student-centered education, led by the Reinventing Schools Coalition (RISC) – a group of consultants who had come from Alaska. As to the specifics, though, she wasn’t entirely sure. “When I saw what was advertised,” Lodge said, “I got the idea that it was geared toward high school. I had no idea this was about systemic change. I ended up

taking two high school teachers with me. It was just the three of us.” They were impressed by what they saw, a three-day symposium presenting a view of standards-based practice that addressed the implications of reform on a systemic level. In addition to discussions of standards-based reporting, differentiation, shared leadership, vision setting, student-centeredness, school culture and classroom culture, they discussed how one might bring these together into an educational system – an educational system that brought every learner to a level of proficiency on every standard deemed “essential.”

On the fourth day of the symposium, the Department of Education and RISC presented a model for a cohort of school districts to work together to support each other in implementing the ideas and practices discussed. On that day, the attending districts were invited to apply for membership in this cohort. Lodge and the two teachers had not attended that fourth day; because of this, she believed, they were not eligible to apply. After a few days of silence, Diana Doiron, standards-based education specialist for the state, contacted Lodge, asking why they hadn’t applied and urging them to do so. Lodge talked about it with then-superintendent Frank Sherburn. The last day of the Hermon conference was May 15. The DOE received MSAD 57’s application before May 27, the posted deadline. Because the DOE wanted to get the member sites selected in time for a major gathering in August, the site visit was quickly scheduled for June 18.

On June 18, members of the RISC team visited the district in order to determine whether or not RSU 57 had the capacity to make that change at that time. Diana Doiron reported in her notes on her visit that the district was reviewed according to seven categories: leadership, shared vision, instruction, standards, assessments, reporting and continuous improvement.

The visiting team noted a number of strengths at RSU 57. In the category of *leadership*, the team noted a general climate of research and study toward standards. They noted that Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were in place. They noted that the district had a goal that all conversations were to be about student learning. In the category of *shared vision*, the team noted that the district understood the concept of student input and that the school board supported “safety nets” for students. In the category of *instruction*, the team saw the emerging use of flexible groups for student learning and a Response to Intervention plan at all levels, though at varying degrees of implementation. Regarding *standards*, the team noted that curriculum maps existed, though in draft form. In the category of *assessments*, the team noted a strong calibration of staff (consistency) in the district’s student profile system of tracking achievement. All levels, they saw, were talking about using data to inform discussion. Also, for *assessment*, students were offered multiple pathways for demonstrating achievement. In the category of *reporting*, the team saw standards-referenced report cards throughout the elementary schools and an intervention policy in the high school that provided support to anyone receiving a 76 or below. Finally, in the category of *continuous improvement*, the team noted that the leadership of RSU 57 was reflective and that the staff and administration of RSU 57 had a process for looking at and using data.

In light of this capacity, and the district’s explicit commitment in 2009 to move toward proficiency-based, student-centered learning, RSU 57 was accepted into what was then called “the RISC cohort,” coordinated by the Maine DOE and the Reinventing Schools Coalition. The one other district that joined that first year was RSU 15, Gray/New Gloucester.

Where Did this Capacity Come From?

The capacity that the visiting team found in RSU 57 was the product of many experiences, conversations and decisions going back as long as 15 years. High school principal Chris Elkington pointed out that, just on the face of it, shifting into the idea of standards was relatively easy “because people understood the *Learning Results*” that had been adopted in 1997. Other administrators brought their knowledge of standards-based learning into the district from previous positions. Bill Zima, who was assistant principal of the Massabesic Middle School until 2011, remembered being handed a binder of standards when he began teaching middle school science in Florida in the late 1990s. He was forced to “come up with a variety of ways to teach those standards.” Alfred Elementary School principal Virginia Drouin had a long history of working with individualized learning approaches in her early years in New Hampshire, and, in fact, had done thesis work on the topic of bringing kids into their own learning processes. Participants in this study referenced multiple trainings – in differentiation, multiple intelligences, responsive classroom – that all fed into the idea of student-centeredness. On top of that, despite the frustrations it provoked, the experience of the district with the Local Assessment System – during which the state mandated an extensive amount of curriculum and assessment work between 2002 and 2004, and then suddenly ended the project – had the positive outcome of spurring the district to reframe its entire curriculum. Finally, the district’s move toward fulfilling the state’s Response to Intervention requirement also supported standards and student-centeredness.

In 2004, the elementary schools (K-6) of MSAD 57 adopted a standards-based report card. The sense among the administrators was that it “just made sense” and, according to principal Virginia Drouin, was very much of a piece with what elementary schools in the district were doing, especially in the primary grades. Lyman Elementary School Principal Kevin Perkins pointed out that in the shift to a standards-based system, “you won’t see much change in the kindergarten, because this work is so close to what kindergarten teachers do, anyway.” Curriculum Coordinator Lori Lodge remembers the process going smoothly, though there were complications and questions along the way. There was no “pushback” from faculty or parents. “We designed our report card around learning goals and then graded them on a (1) through (4) scale, and that’s always been messy. We had many parent forums. Parents didn’t push back on it, but they really wanted to understand it. They wanted to understand what a (3) meant. Was it an (A)? Was it a (B)? They wanted to connect the two systems.”

Some teachers in the district elementary school do remember a transition to the new report card that wasn’t entirely smooth. Said one teacher, “I think parents were so used to A-F percentage grades, it was a transition.” This teacher also remembered that it was

a transition for teachers. When she came to the district, it was the first time she had worked with a standards-based report card. “It was new for me,” she said. “What my grade book looked like completely changed in terms of how I was keeping track of that evidence.” Also, she had to figure out a lot of it on her own. “I had started with another new teacher. We worked with each other to work our way through it.”

In 2009, the district moved Massabesic Middle School to a standards-based report card. Again, this was the culmination of some years of conversation. Principal Mark Fisher remembered it beginning in 2007 and 2008. He had been concerned with math scores. “Our math scores were not where we needed them to be.” At the same time, according to then-Assistant Principal Bill Zima, the middle school was exploring various models of alternative programs to try to find a program that would work in their school. Fisher visited King Middle School in Portland, which was operating an alternative program based on expeditionary learning, which presaged many elements of the proficiency-based approach. “We looked into it,” said Zima, “and found that it was frightfully expensive. So Mark and I looked at each other and said, ‘What can we do to approximate that here?’ We started reading up on it, and it just starts leading down these paths.”

Zima recounted a moment of clarity when he went to a conference put on by Rick and Becky Dufour (authors of *Whatever It Takes* and proponents of Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs). “They had a very simple set of questions: 1) what do we need [kids] to know and be able to do? 2) how will we know if they know it? 3) what will we do if they don’t know it?” Beginning with math, but quickly expanding to the other content areas, Zima sat down with the content area teams and spent a year working through the question *What do we need kids to know and be able to do?* “We used the *Learning Results*, and said, ‘Let’s go through this process and see what it really means.’ We were gathering our framework, and we were going to use that to talk about *How will we know?* And, *What will we do if they do know?* And, *What will we do if they don’t know?*” By then, though, the district had decided to join the RISC cohort, and the plans of the middle school became a part of the larger plans of the district.

When asked what pieces were in place that made this work possible, Lyman Elementary Principal Kevin Perkins summed it up: “[We had] the foundational pieces, the system of continuous improvement, a knowledge of the standards, and the processes used to create them. The sense of transparency – working on procedures and making decisions in the open so we were all on the same page. A shared vision and a moral imperative – a sense of moral purpose.” Other administrators – e.g., middle school Principal Mark Fisher, Curriculum Coordinator Lori Lodge – have indicated that the firmness of administration on the fact of the change, if not the *manner* of it, has been an advantage. John Davis attributed the general lack of conflict that has accompanied the district’s move to a proficiency-based system to the steadfastness of its supporters. “First of all, to me there is no question to what we’re going to do. I’m not constantly debating this issue with myself. Understand that I’m committed. I’m not going to back away from this. We said, ‘This is the way we’re moving, and if that’s not working for you, then we need to bring you up to speed.’ This is not a hysterical thing. We’re moving deliberately.”

Continuing to Build Capacity: Professional Development

After being accepted into the Reinventing Schools Coalition cohort, RSU 57 entered into a sequence of professional development unprecedented for the district. It started at home. Copies of *Delivering on the Promise* – by RISC founders Rich Delorenzo, Wendy Battino, Rick Schrieber and Barbara B. Gaddy Carrio – were given to all staff to read over the summer. In August, the first of the symposiums was held at RSU 15 (Gray/New Gloucester). This training – called *Understanding the Model* but referred to as “the symposium” by many in RSU 57 – presented the basic RISC model over four days and made the moral/ethical argument for why change was necessary, a.k.a. the moral imperative. The RISC model is based on four pillars:

1. Shared vision (“the educational community speaks with one voice,” according to RISC literature),
2. Standards-based design (“the nuts and bolts”),
3. Leadership (“the deliberate focus on developing strong leaders at every level”), and
4. Continuous improvement (“the systemic processes at every level that ensure that improvement is never ending”)

Thirty faculty and administrators went to the August 2009 symposium. Then, in September, a group of teachers, administrators, students and board members attended when the symposium was offered again. In January 2010, a third symposium was held. In June 2010, RSU 57 hosted its own symposium at Massabesic Middle School, with 250 staff members present, along with a few guests from other districts. For some, this was when the *exploration* of a new direction quickened into *movement* toward a new direction. Bill Zima, then-assistant principal of the middle school, described this meeting as the “aha!” moment for him, being in a room with nearly 300 educators exploring these issues and “having fun. It was very powerful.”

During that year, Zima, Lodge and Lyman Elementary Principal Kevin Perkins took point in coordinating proficiency-based work in the district. Lodge said, “Once [the district was] selected as one of the first cohort schools, Kevin, Bill and I stepped up to facilitate the RSU 57 group at the first symposium. At this symposium we led the conversation about the development of a plan to take back to the district (and Frank [Sherburn, then-superintendent]) for input. We just kept the ball rolling and set up regular meetings with Diana [Doiron, standards-based education specialist at Maine DOE] since the state was helping us along at this point. The teachers, students and board members who attended the first few symposiums returned enthusiastic. Kevin, Bill and I got more involved. The enthusiasm fueled more enthusiasm. We were just very passionate about making it work.” Bill Zima was singled out by school board President Karla Bergeron as being especially effective in making the case for standards-based reform. Lori Lodge recognized this also: “Bill...really understood how to get staff and students on board to make it work. He showcased what was successful and modeled it for others in his own building. He could talk the talk, and walk the walk, as they say.” Among the things the district did to move staff was use the voices of the students. Lodge

remembered, “We had a teacher in-service day where we asked a student panel questions. It was students who had attended the institutes. Teachers had to listen, since it was not coming from admin or other teachers. It was coming from the kids in their classes.”

Commitment and Enthusiasm

When staff returned to school in August of 2010, a commitment vote was held. On the first workshop day, Lori Lodge, Bill Zima and Kevin Perkins spoke about the district’s movement toward proficiency-based learning and the professional development that had been done in the previous year with *Understanding the Model*. A consensogram – a commonly used tool to determine consensus on an issue – was used to gauge the staff’s willingness to move forward. As the staff exited the auditorium, on their way to work in their own buildings, they were asked to place a dot on large charts hung along the back walls. *Should the district move forward towards standards-based, student-centered education?* Approximately 80 percent, according to Lori Lodge, voted in the affirmative.

Among staff, the second year saw a wellspring of enthusiasm. After *Understanding the Model*, faculty engaged in what was then referred to as *Beacon* training (the name soon changed to *Classroom Design and Delivery*, or *CDD*). Like *Understanding the Model*, *CDD* was a four-day training. It focused on shifting the culture of the classroom, putting in structures that encourage students to assume “voice and choice,” and allow for teachers to address the needs of all learners in the room. According to RISC materials, *CDD* trains in the “first implementation of tools to engage all students in the ownership of their learning. Teachers will learn to build collegial support around problem solving in an effort to implement a learner-centered culture, create procedural efficiency, and develop transparency so students can navigate their learning.”

According to some teachers, *CDD* training answered the question left hanging by *Understanding the Model*: How can this work in my classroom? At the middle school, a group of teachers had been working on piloting standards-based reporting and hadn’t been happy with the outcomes. They had done a reading group around Rick Wormley’s *Fair Isn’t Always Equal* and were still struggling with how to make it work on the ground. “Then they went to [*CDD*] training,” remembered Bill Zima. “They came back, and it was like this spark that just popped. By using the processes and tools that they learned, they were able to allow kids to start moving more independently and to have more ownership.”

With the new enthusiasm, teachers began requesting training rather than waiting for it to be offered. Lori Lodge recalled, “I had a number of teachers who still needed *Understanding the Model*. And I had my ‘omnivores’ who could not get enough training. I could not get enough of my teachers through the *Beacon* training because we were restricted in the number of seats we had available. For me to start getting people through the *Beacon*-level training was tricky. It was first come, first serve. You could

sign up on the online professional development form, and if you got put on a waiting list, then you got put on a waiting list.”

The reasons for this bottleneck were logistical and mundane. There were only so many trainers; there was only so much money; and there was only so much time. Said Lodge, “You can’t offer it during the school year and send a lot of people all at once because you then have the release time for a four-day training, and to find the substitutes and the money to send the teachers is difficult.”

High school principal Chris Elkington echoed this sentiment. “We saw at the high school that unless some staff were going to be paid for their training during the summer, they weren’t going to do it. So that meant the district had to supply the training during the school year, and that made it very difficult for us. Some days we had to have 14 or 15 substitutes.” Administrators regularly counted this as one of the biggest challenges of the work, balancing the desire to train all staff quickly with the fact that the schools still had to conduct business. “As we had more teachers getting the *Beacon* level of training,” said Lori Lodge, “things began to take off. And then you had the people who were left behind. The ones who wanted that training were getting extremely frustrated.”

In addition, the finances were a problem to be solved. In the first year of the RISC cohort, 2009-10, when it was just RSU 57 and RSU 15, the state had subsidized much of the training. That ended the year following, with the projected 2010 state budget shortfall. The district directed the bulk of its federal grant monies – Title IIA, professional development, and Title VI, rural low-income schools – toward this professional development, as well as the normal budgeted amount that would have been directed toward professional development. Ultimately, these were especially flush years as federal stimulus funds (ARRA) flowed through these grants, but the amount of professional development needed meant that RSU 57 would have to develop arrangements with RISC to offset costs. For example, in June of 2010, the district hosted an *Understanding the Model* training for other districts so that RSU 57 might finance *CDD* training for their own faculty that August. Later, as the cohort evolved into a cooperative of multiple districts – the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning, or MCCL – cost sharing and economies of scale made the achievement of these professional development goals possible.

At the end of the 2010-11 school year, the district held an in-house *CDD* training for 100 faculty members, but Lodge realized she had around a score of teachers who hadn’t completed the first round of training, *Understanding the Model*. They may not have trained for any number of reasons, including family commitments, other professional commitments, a desire not to be out of the classroom or a genuine belief that proficiency-based learning was not the right path. Regardless, the mere fact that there were two populations in the district – trained and untrained – created tension.

High school Principal Chris Elkington pointed out that, for some faculty members, there was a reluctance to believe that this movement was something beyond a latest fad, a trend that, like the Local Assessment System, would be reversed by those higher up. One teacher said that early on there was uncertainty about what exactly was happening

in the district. “People were excited, but they were confused because they weren’t really sure how the district got involved. There wasn’t transparency about expectations in our district and the process.” This teacher recognized that clarity might have been a “double-edged sword. “On one hand,” the teacher said, “word of mouth is really powerful, especially when kids are going to one classroom and seeing change, and they’re requesting it in another class. That’s really powerful. But it also puts those teachers who haven’t been trained – even if they’ve chosen not to be trained – it puts them on the defensive.”

By the summer of 2011, it became necessary for the district to address the untrained faculty. First, the district insisted that untrained faculty become trained. “We said,” recalled Lodge, “that anyone who had not been symposium-trained had to be done by June 2011.” This was something of a line drawn in the sand. As Alfred Elementary Principal Virginia Drouin said, “This was a time when the district did say, ‘This is the way we’re going. So you can do it, or you can choose not to stay. But this is the way we’re going.’” Second, the district offered an alternate pathway to the training. If a faculty member was unable to complete the four-day training, they were allowed to take an online *Standards-based Design* course offered through Alaska Pacific University. In the end, between 50 and 60 faculty members took this option. The district paid for it as part of its normal contractual obligation to pay for college courses. The teachers could receive college credit and use the course toward recertification. Additionally, since the course contained a design element, it prepared these teachers for their upcoming *CDD* training.

There were some objections when the district drew this line. As mentioned above, in June of 2011, RSU 57 actually hosted an *Understanding the Model* training for other districts. “We used that as a way to raise revenue to pay for our own training,” recalled Lodge. “I had some staff members who didn’t think it was fair that they couldn’t have a seat at that *Understanding the Model* training. What [Superintendent] Frank [Sherburn] and I said was, ‘You had multiple opportunities to get that training. That didn’t happen. We have no seats available. We can’t call these people and say that we need 12 more seats, and we have provided you with an alternate pathway.’ They didn’t like it, but they accepted it and took the course so they could move on.” Whatever the reason for putting off training, according to Lodge, these teachers didn’t seem to be genuinely resisting the idea. “They wanted the *Understanding the Model* training so they could take the *CDD* course. If they completed what they were supposed to complete in June, they were eligible for that next level in August. Many of them felt, ‘I don’t want to be the one on the outside looking in anymore because my colleagues are getting really involved, and I want to get really involved, too.’”

The district continued its mass *CDD* trainings so that by spring 2012, all but new teachers had been trained to that second level. In the meantime, many of those teachers who had been trained have moved on to the third level of training, *Instructional Design and Delivery*. A number of teachers – the “omnivores” as Lodge called them – sprinted ahead to the fourth level, called simply *Guide Training*. These teachers served as coaches in all buildings throughout the process. In the high school, by shifting enrollments around, three *Guide*-trained teachers have been freed up for one trimester

each as dedicated Performance-Based Education (PBE) coaches in the building for the 2012-13 year.

Throughout the relationship with the Reinventing Schools Coalition, RSU 57 has taken some criticism that the district was simply bringing in a new program – that they were simply “doing RISC.” The administration knew that it had to “change the language being used. We were not simply ‘doing RISC,’” said Lodge. “What we’re doing is transforming and trying to change our whole system. It’s not about RISC as a program...it’s that RISC came together because they transformed a system, and we’d like to learn from their experience. We are engaging in a systemic change, and this is one model we might use to build our system.” The relationship with RISC has changed now that the primary campaign of professional development has cycled down. In the 2011-12 school year, the district conducted its own *Understanding the Model* trainings for incoming staff, led by Superintendent John Davis. But *Classroom Design and Delivery*, according to a number of administrators, is training that RISC does especially well. Lodge counted it among the key components for the success of the transformation thus far that her entire staff had been through *CDD*. “Having all of my staff go through that,” she said, “with a RISC consultant and getting the very same type of training has been huge. They all hear the same thing from the same trainers: that consistency is huge. The vocabulary and language have to be consistent.”

Meanwhile: Evolution and Vision

While engaging the Reinventing Schools Coalition in this work, the district continued to develop its own vision of “what education should be like in RSU 57.” Pockets of the district, as reported above, had been working on their vision of education for years. And even as RISC became the main stem of professional development after 2009, teachers and administrators in the district continued exploring other avenues to flesh out the vision of RSU 57. Bea McGarvey (co-author with Chuck Schwahn of the book *Inevitable*) was invited to work with staff on bringing customized learning practices into their classrooms. The entire district was assigned, over the summer of 2011, *The Art and Science of Teaching*, by Robert Marzano, an author whose ideas about standards-based reform had been discussed in the district for a decade. According to Principal Mark Fisher, Marzano readings were a regular part of the conversation as the middle school engaged in its early standards-based work.

The task was to bring these various ideas into a single vision. In 2009-10, principals met with parent-teacher committees and community groups – for example, Lyman Elementary Principal Kevin Perkins met with the local Lions Club – and engaged them in conversations around questions such as, “What would a good teacher look like?” “What does a good student look like?” “What are schools like?” “What should schools be like?” On in-service days and during faculty meetings, teachers engaged these same questions. This led to the framing of a vision statement that, according to Lori Lodge, “we thought at the time looked pretty good, but it was two years ago and has [since] changed so many times. [Still], we had a vision statement that we moved forward into the next school year.”

Over the years since, with the help of consultant Mary Jane McCalmon, the vision of the district evolved. RSU 57 entered 2012 with a concise vision statement:

RSU 57 is a leader on the forefront of education where all individuals are involved in high quality learning for the future.

A second level of statements detailed what exactly was meant by “high quality learning for the future.” RSU 57 developed separate pieces about their vision of *learning*, their vision of *respect and responsibility*, their vision of a *collaborative environment* and their vision of *technology*, each with three or four descriptors. For example, the vision of learning included the descriptor, “Each individual is a critical and innovative thinker who adapts to new ideas.” The vision of respect and responsibility included the descriptor, “Each individual accepts differences of others.” The vision of technology included the descriptor, “Each individual determines the accuracy and credibility of information to make informed decisions and produce quality work.”

A third level defining the components of the vision went even further to concretize how these ideas unfold in the actions of educators. This document described the elements of RSU 57’s educational system, including:

- *Comprehensive system of learning* (e.g., “clearly defined learning goals for students”),
- *Instruction* (e.g., “is student-centered, ensures student choice and voice, a variety of research based strategies”);
- *Curriculum* (e.g., “guaranteed and viable for all students”);
- *Assessment and reporting*;
- Management of resources: technology and financial;
- *Personnel* (e.g., “staff hiring and evaluation processes are aligned with the district’s vision for learning”);
- *Parent/community engagement* (e.g., “parents are partners with learners & staff in developing & supporting quality learning experiences for children”); and
- *Continuous improvement* (e.g., “reflection on practice, based on learner success, is ongoing”).

Finally, the district laid out the core beliefs that underlay this vision:

- All students can learn;
- Students learn in different ways, in different settings, and at different rates for different futures;
- Successful student learning is meaningful and relevant to the learner;
- Clear learning targets and continuous reflection are essential to successful learning;

- Students learn best in a safe environment characterized by positive relationships with caring, competent individuals; and
- High standards of performance are expected of all.

The specificity and comprehensiveness of these vision and belief statements demonstrated an understanding that vision, beliefs and action are intricately connected. The relationship between talking the talk and walking the walk was only clear if the talk itself was clear. Superintendent John Davis said, “We want to make sure decisions are consistent with what we’re talking about,” but recognized that “it’s not enough that the superintendent and the school board say this is what we want to do,” and then the teachers do it. “It’s really important,” said Davis, “that you begin to inculcate this into all staff, so it’s a part of their belief system.”

The key to the vision, according to Davis, was in the first two words of the first core belief: “all students.” The implications of teaching to “all students” were huge and are still being discovered in RSU 57. “Once you say you want to teach all children,” said Davis, “and you want to teach them to high standards, that brings about not just a change in your belief system, it also brings about a really dramatic change in your organization. Our organizations are established to teach most children, to teach children based on the fact that everyone around [the same age] is in the same place academically, and is prepared to understand, compete and complete the work that’s being delivered by a teacher. So we taught children on the industrial model, and it worked for quite some time for most kids.” Even in the top-performing schools in Maine, the level of proficiency hovers around 80 percent. At RSU 57, if students achieved to that high rate, 660 students out of 3,300 would not be achieving proficiency on any given day.

According to Davis, the difference in the vision between the industrial model and a student-centered model is evident in the third step of the learning process. The first step, defining clear goals for students, and the second step, assessing whether students have learned what they ought to have, could both be part of an industrial system, or, more likely, a standards-referenced system. The third step, what are you going to do based on that assessment, is where Davis said the difference lies. “In the traditional model, I simply record [the student’s score] for posterity. This student got a 100 percent, this student got a 50 percent, the next day we move on to the next unit. It is not acceptable to allow students to know 50 percent of what you believe is important material. You have to do something about it.” By “you,” Davis was referring to the whole district, not merely teachers. “It’s not about a really neat lesson or a creative lesson or management of the classroom. RSU 57 is at a point where we’re saying, ‘We have to fundamentally shift.’”

The vast majority of RSU 57 faculty members have ascribed to this view. Any number of respondents, when asked what drew them to these ideas, or why they resonated, indicated that the value of the ideas seemed obvious. One teacher in the high school said, “It makes sense. I think the barometer I use to judge anything in education is if I want it for my kids.” An elementary teacher who has worked in a variety of primary

settings pointed to the fact that in an area where you need to be sure that *every learner* is competent in every learning target, then you design individual learning plans that suit *every learner*. There are legitimate questions about implementation, the adequacy of resources, and what might be lost in leaving behind the old system, but the basic premise of the proficiency-based, student-centered system seems to have been thoroughly embedded in RSU 57.

Steps Along the Way

Elements of this fundamental shift can be seen in the actions the district has taken thus far. First, most importantly, the district has clearly committed to this path. Though, according to teachers and administrators, the district hasn't done "as good a job as we might hope" in communicating with parents and the community, the board has been clear and unequivocal in its support of moving toward a proficiency-based system. Resources have been directed toward the move in the form of professional development monies and in the form of fiscal and professional support for the MCCL. The adopted curriculum was an equally clear statement of the board's support. The curriculum, developed by teachers and administrators from the schools of the MCCL, presents a comprehensive set of standards, based on the Maine *Learning Results* and the Common Core, and organized in non-age-based performance levels. Also, the board, as mentioned already, hired John Davis – whose forte is the transformation of school districts to proficiency-based, student-centered systems – as interim superintendent.

Additionally, RSU 57 has continued adoption of proficiency-based structures throughout the district, including in the high school. Standards-based report cards, scored (1) through (4), will be used throughout the district, K-12, though in the high school, dual reporting – showing proficiency scores alongside "corresponding" percentage grades – will be used. Supporting this, the district will adopt *Educate* as its grading and reporting software. The MCCL chose the *Educate* software and worked with the developer to customize the program to the cohort's needs. In the 2011-12 school year, though there were no formal pilots, faculty have been "playing" with *Educate*. Toward the end of the year, teachers entered *Educate* and began "leveling" their students, i.e., assigning them to performance levels in each of the measurement topics of the curriculum. A student may be high-performing in one math standard and low-performing in another. The idea is that this student will receive instruction – and may move from teacher to teacher – according to his or her performance on each of these measurement topics, rather than participating in an overarching "third grade math" class.

Enacting the curriculum would be impossible without developing a system that allowed fluid motion for students and flexible grouping, a central tenet of a proficiency-based system. The district has committed to beginning the move toward flexible groupings, though each building has been given flexibility in how they enact this. Shapleigh Elementary School, for example, has planned to look at its students as one group, which is possible because it is a small school of under 200 kids. Other elementary schools have looked more toward pods – kindergarten/first, second/third, etc. – with the idea

that flexible grouping will take place within these pods. Lyman Elementary Principal Kevin Perkins indicated that he's planning to remove some actual walls to allow for larger groups and more fluidity – a more literal interpretation of “restructuring school” than has perhaps been seen elsewhere.

A final policy-level decision that supports this work has been the adoption a new evaluation system. In the 2011-12 school year, the district developed tools and began teacher and principal observations based on Marzano's work, *The Art and Science of Teaching*, which the district has taken as defining “quality instruction.” The *RSU 57 District Supervision Plan* focuses on the first of Marzano's four domains, “Classroom Strategies and Behaviors,” and divides these into three segments: 1) routine events, 2) content, and 3) enacted on the spot. In 2011-12, observations focused on “routine events,” with indicators around the physical layout of the classroom, the communication of learning goals, establishment of codes of conduct, etc. Essentially, by adopting this model, RSU 57 has made the statement that proficiency-based, student-centered practices define good teaching. More importantly, according to Kevin Perkins, they've said not only that this definition will inform teacher and principal evaluations, but also that it will inform conversations of best practice and the formative professional development of teachers and principals.

Experience and the Continuing Conversation

In addition to these commitments enacted in policy, the district continued to maintain the stance of *continuous improvement*. “Mistakes are inherent in learning,” said one teacher. “We've certainly learned that!” As faculty and administration have moved forward, experiences have led to reflective conversations.

In the middle school, for example, the faculty strived early on to bring the “student-paced” ideal into their classroom. The logical extension of the truism that everyone learns at their own pace was that faculty should allow students to move along at their own pace. This proved to be unworkable, as students would often put off their work, and it fed the idea that proficiency-based learning meant “no deadlines.” Middle school teachers realized that while they would give considerable voice and choice around how quickly a student progressed, how a student approached a problem, and how a student demonstrated his or her learning, the teacher would set the minimum pace of progress. If a student were not achieving to that pace, then interventions would ensue. In 2011-12, the district began using the formulation, “teacher-paced or faster,” current within the MCCL, to describe the scope of choice open to its students.

One difficulty that all schools in the district are still wrestling with is the question of standards around work habits and behavior. The premise of proficiency-based education is that if a student demonstrates their understanding at a (4) level (exceeds the standard), then it doesn't matter if that student is late, doesn't have their homework on time, or is disrespectful and talkative. If they can achieve to a (4) level, then their score is a (4). As superintendent John Davis said, “When you go to a doctor for a cholesterol test, your score isn't raised because you were punctual and well-behaved.”

How to report on issues surrounding work habits hasn't been settled. All faculty members, from kindergarten through high school, agree that achievement must be separated from behavior, and they've worked extensively on rubrics and descriptors, but the exact mechanics remain undetermined.

The high school – because of considerations about transcript, college acceptance and scholarships – remains a focus of concern. A number of high school faculty members were “early adopters” of the RISC approach, but the school didn't have the years'-long history of standards-based practice that the elementary schools did. Also, a number of faculty members remained skeptical until only recently. Implementation continues apace. In 2012-13, implementation efforts will focus on underclassmen in a few content areas. There will be a dedicated performance-based education coach. Throughout the school, focus will be on increasing multiple pathways to achievement, including pathways that don't necessarily take place on campus. It's a tough philosophical shift, according to Principal Chris Elkington. For example, one area being explored is early college opportunities through York County Community College (YCCC). One-hundred-and-twenty-seven Massabesic High School students took courses for credit in 2011-12. This met with some pushback, since the perception is that these are high-achieving students and that if they're taking courses at YCCC, then they are not taking course at Massabesic. (“Our teachers want to teach those students,” said Elkington. “I get that.”) The larger concern has been around the fact that if the students are at YCCC, they aren't at Massabesic. In what way are these students a part of the community that is Massabesic High School?

Getting Great

In 2010-11, the faculty had begun its work with *Beacon* training and had been freed by the administration to experiment and risk, even, failure. That, says then-middle school Assistant Principal Bill Zima, was when things “got really great.” Discussing one particular team, he recalled, “You could walk down that hallway, and there was all this energy. It was so good. There was this deep buzz of energy, of kids engaged in learning, doing projects and writing.” Interdisciplinary, project-based units thrived, and they'd made the commitment to deeper learning for the kids.

In 2012, one high school teacher, still skeptical, has begun seeing results in her classroom. “I've got some kids in my lower-level classes who are achieving. I've got this one senior. I keep telling her every time I give her back an assessment, I tell her, ‘I'm so proud of you.’ She says, ‘I'm proud of me!’” The teacher also has kids at the other end of the spectrum. “I have some sophomores in pre-calc this year, and they're pushing me, and I absolutely love it. They're innovative problem solvers, and they just can't get enough of it. They're using the tools that I'm giving them.” This teacher had a hard time coming to this point (“It was rough – I'm going to be honest.”), but she realized that there's a point at which you can remain skeptical and still move forward. (“Everyone loves complaining, but there's still the job at hand.”) By way of advice to other teachers in her position, she said, “The thing that worked really well was surrounding myself with people that understood me as a teacher, that supported me as a teacher and could lead

me. Try not to surround yourself with the people that are negative. That's hard because being a skeptic you want to go with that crew that are skeptical. Move out of your comfort zone. What is best for the kids is not you sitting in the negative cheering section. Try to pick up a few pieces that you can grab onto. I picked up on the 21st-century learning needs. *What do they need to be able to do to succeed in life?* Grab onto something, even if it's the littlest piece, and really focus on that, and you'll see yourself starting to branch out.”

Another high school teacher cited a student as inspiration. This student “was highly motivated and got accepted to Harvard. It's our first student in 20 years to get accepted to Harvard. This young lady chose to go faster. She wanted to accelerate. She was a great role model, and she sort of became our beacon, because people could see, ‘Oh look what so-and-so has done.’ She was able to get two years of English into one year because she really pushed herself and wanted to show it. We would conference if she didn't get a (4) – she was pushing – and she would work on a different way to get a (4). Kids aren't used to that. Traditionally, schooling has been ‘Here's your paper,’ and that's it. Now it's ‘Here's your paper, let's conference. What are you missing? Let me help you fill in the gaps.’ That's different.”

As more and more teachers, administrators, parents and community members have such experiences – almost always involving being amazed by kids – the philosophical ideas and the practice become more firmly embedded. It's a particular phenomenon of this work that talking the talk and walking the walk are reciprocally related to each other, reinforcing each other on a day-to-day basis.

Superintendent John Davis, though, firmly believes that being clear within oneself about what one believes is essential if an educator is going engage in this transformation.

What is the scope of your responsibility as an educator? “You have to fundamentally believe,” he said, “that it is your responsibility to teach every child who comes through that door, and that you're willing to reorganize your organization to accomplish that. If you don't think that's a necessary thing, then I would say don't undertake this challenge. There are people that I deal with who fundamentally believe it is not their responsibility to teach all children. They fundamentally believe their job is to teach those who are willing and compliant. I've had people say to me time and time again – people who work in the college level, people who work in this institution, and the public I deal with – that if that child doesn't want to learn, then that's not our responsibility. I suggest a superintendent who takes this on has to say, ‘No, that is our responsibility.’”