

Stay the Course on Maine's Learning Results

The vision of assuring that Maine learners are “among the best educated in the world” is a compelling one. Emphasis on high achievement for all is imperative if Maine is to meet its economic and demographic challenges. Our vitality as a state depends on a high performing public education system. Moving forward with the implementation of Learning Results is essential in assuring that **all** children in Maine, regardless of their place of residency, will have the same **opportunity** to achieve at high levels. With that in mind, the Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education urges Governor Baldacci and members of the 121st legislature to “stay the course” with the implementation of Learning Results. Maine students deserve nothing less.

Some say that because of the State's substantial budget deficit we do not have the resources to implement Learning Results by 2007/2008, as required by legislation passed in the previous session of the Legislature. But, think back. Maine's Learning Results were born in lean economic times and Mainers still had the courage, conviction and forward thinking to understand what is needed to prepare for the knowledge economy. In 1993, the Maine Legislature commissioned the State Board of Education to set goals for education in Maine and the Task Force on Learning Results was established soon thereafter. A collaborative process followed with students, educators, and community members from around the state assisting the Task Force in developing the standards. The guiding principles were adopted in 1996 and on May 22, 1997 Maine became the one of the first states in the nation to adopt education standards in the form of Learning Results. Maine is again in difficult economic times but we must sustain the momentum of this investment in our children's future.

One does not have to look much farther than the paper industry to understand that Maine's economy is changing. The days of graduating high school and going into the local mill or factory are gone. Today's reality is that a higher education degree is as basic to employment as a high school diploma was 20 years ago. For there to be success at the post-secondary level, there must be a strong foundation of learning from pre-k-12.

Learning Results reflects a fundamental shift in Maine's K-12 education system. Learning Results is not just about seat time in school. From a system requiring “seat time” for specific courses, we have moved to a system that defines the level of knowledge that a student must master in each core content area—language arts, math, science, etc.

Undoubtedly, Maine is going through challenging economic times. This does not mean, however, that we have to stop all forward progress toward the realization of our goals for Maine students. While there is some sentiment to back off from the Learning Results, we believe that is shortsighted. Decisions made must be student-focused. Much progress has been made and the work has to continue. We need to hold steady and stay the course with Maine's Learning Results. Maine kids deserve nothing less.

A Task Force mandated by the Legislature has recently released the findings of a comprehensive state-wide survey of teachers, principals, and superintendents on the status of Learning Results implementation. A significant majority of them strongly support Learning Results noting that they provided a positive framework for improving teaching and learning. Many also had concerns about their District's ability to meet the 2007/2008 implementation timeframe, most often citing the need for more time and more statewide technical assistance. These concerns are understandable given the nature of local assessment systems that will be needed, uncertainty about what additional measures may be needed by federal "No Child Left Behind" legislation, and the fact that they were asked to project our outcome four and five years into the future.

We on the Coalition understand and share these concerns. However, we believe the appropriate course is to address each of the concerns rather than change the implementation dates a year after they have been set. There is power in the idea of a specific implementation date. Nothing quite focuses mind and effort more than knowing there will be a reckoning. We believe it is premature to make such a decision at this time. Let us continue to address the concerns raised and reassess the situation a year from now when we will have a better sense of the nature of the federal requirements and the longer-term budget situation.

###

The Maine Coalition for Excellence in Education is a private, non-profit statewide partnership of individuals from business, education, government and the community who are committed to continuous improvement in the way we prepare our children for the future.

Appeared in the Maine Sunday Telegram, March 2, 2003 – Signed by David Ott, Chair.