MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

Proficiency-Based Diploma Systems in Maine:

Implementing District-Level High School Graduation Policies

Phase III Technical Policy Report

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Context

In May 2012, the 125th Maine Legislature passed the chaptered law *An Act to Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy* (S.P.439 - L.D.1422). Within this mandate, Statute 4722-A describes the required components of the proficiency-based diploma, which all public Maine school districts were expected to incorporate by 2018. In support of this law, the Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs has requested that the Maine Education Policy Research Institute's (MEPRI) work plan include studies designed to compile data, examine progress and explore impacts regarding implementation of this state policy within local schools and school districts across the state of Maine. MEPRI is a nonpartisan research institute funded jointly by the Maine State Legislature and the University of Maine System, with a mandate to collect and analyze education information and perform targeted education research for the Legislature.

Phase I: Preliminary Implementation of a Proficiency-based Diploma System in Maine (A School Level Analysis)

In 2012, MEPRI conducted an initial study that examined the preliminary development, costs and impacts of standards-based school programs being implemented in Maine. Nine public schools, including schools representing various configurations of grades PK-12, served as case studies in which this approach was being practiced in some or all classrooms.

This study revealed that Maine educators and educational leaders were working diligently to embrace and apply the underlying philosophies of standards-based education as well as build systems applicable to their local context. Schools beyond the initial phase of shifting belief structures and school culture were grappling with the logistics of implementing some of the changes they saw as necessary within curriculum, scheduling, staffing and reporting achievement. A Working Conceptual Model (see Appendix A) outlining the critical components of a proficiency-based diploma system identified in this empirical study was included in that report (and confirmed in Phase II of the study as mentioned below). Further discussion of the

findings from Phase I of this study of Maine public schools may be found in the report, *Preliminary Implementation of Maine's Proficiency-Based Diploma Program*, available by clicking on the hyperlink attached to the title of the report in this sentence or going to <www.usm.maine.edu/cepare>.

Phase II: Implementation of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System in Maine (A District Level Analysis)

After sharing the findings and recommendations of Phase I with the Maine Legislature and in the publication of the report mentioned above, a second year of the study was commissioned in 2013 to focus on school districts that were in the process of systemically implementing S.P.439-L.D.1422. Phase II of this study further explored the key components of a proficiency-based diploma system identified in the first phase of the study and confirmed that the Working Conceptual Model of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System (see Appendix A) were accurate and evident at the district level as well. In addition, Phase II focused on the examination of systemic benefits and challenges of putting this state law into practice. Findings revealed that district leaders were working attentively to implement these policies with fidelity. District leaders also indicated that a key goal to their implementation was developing practices and policies that were beneficial to all students in their district even when practitioners were faced with challenges of creating common definitions, developing practical learning management systems and finding resources to support their work. Further discussion of district implementation of the law examined in Phase II of this study may be found in the report, *Implementation of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System in Maine: Phase II - District Level Analysis*, available at <www.usm.maine.edu/cepare>.

Cross-Case Analysis of Phase I and Phase II

Following completed research and reporting of Phase II of this study, a comprehensive report was publicly distributed to provide a cross-case analysis of both of the first two phases of the study. This examination incorporated data from school and district case studies as well as further exploration of existing research and theories regarding standards-based education in the United States and international education contexts. This research identified that the state of Maine was certainly at the forefront of policy development in this arena of proficiency-based

education, providing valuable insights into similar on-going school improvement work and education policy efforts across the nation and the globe. The findings from this report of cross-case analysis have been shared within a national conference, internationally casted webinar, regional workshops as well as panels and discussions in Maine. Further discussion of this examination of statewide implementation of a standards-based education policy may be found in the report, *Implementation of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System: Early Experiences in Maine*, available at <www.usm.maine.edu/cepare>.

Phase III: Implementing Proficiency-Based Diploma System in Maine
(An Analysis of District-Level High School Graduation Policies)

As part of the 2014-15 work plan, MEPRI was asked to continue the study of the implementation of S.P.439-L.D.1422 and its impacts on local school districts' practices and policies. In 2014, The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) required public school districts to submit a Confirmation of Readiness or an Extension Application outlining the policies and practices in place and planned for implementation of a proficiency-based diploma system. Subsequently, MDOE provided a letter with feedback and recommended action to each district and was in the process of conducting district visits. Maine's law requires students to demonstrate proficiency in eight content areas (English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Social Studies, Health Education and Physical Education, Visual and Performing Arts, Career and Education Development as well as World Languages) in order to earn a high school diploma. This third phase of the study focused on the content areas of English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics and Science. While many of the policies and proposals discussed in this study were intended to eventually apply to all eight mandated content areas, ELA, Mathematics and Science were the areas with the most substantial level of implementation and established policy development within local districts at this point.

In this Phase III of the study, examination of the application documents, practices, policies and standards of several case study districts provided insights into the development of local high school graduation policies aligned with Maine's proficiency-based diploma legislation. In addition, high school administrators and district leaders in case study districts were asked in interviews to discuss how this state policy has continued to impact their local district and schools. The following material describes the work being done regarding high school graduation

policies that have been proposed and passed in these seven case study districts. This study examines and describes the local implementation process of these districts but does not evaluate the work being conducted in these case study districts and schools. However, policy recommendations are provided at the conclusion of this report.

Sample

This third phase of the study examines the policies and practices in a sample of seven case study public school districts in Maine. These districts represent a range of demographics and varied progress towards implementation of a proficiency-based diploma system. Districts from urban, suburban and rural communities, as identified by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), were included. The rate of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in these case study districts ranged from 5% to 65%. Enrollment in these case study districts also varied, from approximately 1,000 students to almost 3,600 students. High schools within these districts had enrollments from approximately 300 to over 1,000 students. Within this report, district enrollment size is designated as "large" (over 3,000 students), "medium" (2,000 to 3,000 students), or "small" (less than 2,000 students). The sample of case study districts involved in Phase III of this study is also described below in Table 1.

Table 1. Case Studies - 2014-15 Descriptive School District Data

DISTRICT	FRPL (rounded)	Enrollment Size	NCES Locale
District A	65%	small	Rural: Distant
District B	50%	large	City: Small
District C	45%	medium	Town: Distant
District D	40%	large	Rural: Distant
District E	30%	medium	Rural: Distant
District F	10%	small	Suburb: Mid-size
District G	5%	medium	Rural: Fringe

While all case study districts have been implementing some aspects of a proficiency-based education system for at least the past few years, each district received an implementation

extension from MDOE until at least 2020. Thus, many of the districts have standards-based systems in place for the high school graduating class of 2018 as initially required in the state legislation. However, some of the districts are still working to develop local policies regarding key components of proficiency-based high school diploma requirements, such as building course pathways that have common minimum required standards and designating minimum proficiency scores.

Methodology

In Phase III of this study, document review was conducted with materials outlining current and proposed local district high school graduation policies, curricula, implementation timelines, grade reporting systems, course pathway progressions, and academic support systems from all case study districts. In addition, the districts' initial and any revised Confirmation of Readiness or Extension Applications submitted to MDOE were reviewed. The study's lead researcher interviewed key personnel (high school principals, curriculum directors, superintendents, and instructional coaches) in the case study districts. After analysis of documents, qualitative interview data, and identification of key components of implementation, follow-up conversations regarding document and information verification were conducted with authorized district personnel. Upon full review of all data collected, common themes and practices were identified in addition to areas of implementation which did not reveal shared practices. Continued challenges and benefits of this state policy and proficiency-based education approach that were expressed by the study participants were also noted.

Findings

Analysis of data from the research conducted in this study of the processes of implementing district-level high school graduation policies as mandated by Maine's proficiency-based diploma legislation revealed various approaches to meeting the law. Several key aspects of the legislated mandate were identified as critical elements for implementation by district leaders as well as policymakers, state education leaders and practitioners: academic content standards, Maine's Guiding Principles, grade reporting system, defining proficiency levels, providing

multiple pathways and opportunities, defining educational experiences, developing common standards and assessments. This report shares information about districts' work within each component in the designated sections below and outlined in the Overview Chart on page 9. In addition, discussion of the cross case analysis identifying practices or policies common across the case study districts is also presented.

Key Components of Implementation

Academic Content Standards

In 2011, the state standards--commonly known as the Maine Learning Results--for Mathematics and ELA had been updated to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). All districts in this study were utilizing the CCSS for Mathematics and English Language Arts in addition to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) as the foundational reference for developing local systems aligned to content standards. However, none of the districts were using the foundational standards completely and verbatim within their local documents or policies. All districts had engaged in substantial professional work to align curricula to academic standards in a manner that was deemed appropriate for their students. Some districts had adopted regional organizations' adaptations of these standards, such as the "Power Standards" available from the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning that are also based upon the CCSS and NGSS. Others had completed internal district wide work to select and write local adaptations of these foundational standards into unique local curricula and policies. One district leader explained, "We are changing [the standards] to what works for our district." Most districts had selected only some of the standards to be required for demonstration in order to earn a high school diploma or had consolidated content standards and developed local "expectations," "learning targets" or "measurement topics" that were required for graduation.

Many district leaders in this study indicated that full adoption of the CCSS would be too cumbersome. They indicated that meeting each of the CCSS standards individually would be unwieldy and overwhelming even just in terms of the number of standards for each grade span. A high school principal said, "Our goal and our challenge is how to make this our own work instead of the state's. Making it our own was important so it wouldn't overwhelm us or require

Table 2.
OVERVIEW CHART:
2015 PROFICIENCY-BASED DIPLOMA SYSTEM IN MAINE

	Implementation Practice	District A	District B	District C	District D	District E	District F	District G
Column A	Reference Standards: Common Core (Math & ELA) NextGen Science	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Column B	Verbatim Standards (not adapted, summarized, abbreviated)	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**
Column C	MLR Guiding Principles Policies	**TBD**	**TBD**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Column D	Reporting Grade Scale	**1-4 (begin w/class of 2018)**	**1-4 (begin 2016-17)**	**0-100/A-F**	**1-4 (begin 2015-16)**	**4-Jan**	**0-100/A-F**	**0-100/A-F**
Column E	Minimum Proficiency Score	**3**	**TBD**	**70**	**proposed 2.75 in 2015-16**	**3**	**80**	**88 (on req'd content standards)**
Column F	Multiple Opportunities & Multiple Pathways	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Column G	Common Assignments for All Students	**No**	**No**	**No**	**TBD**	**"grade 12" project & other TBD**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Column H	Common Required Content Standards for all Students	**TBD (class of 2018)**	**TBD (class of 2021)**	**TBD**	**TBD**	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Column I	Definition of "educational experience"	**1 credit/TBD after 2015**	**TBD**	**TBD**	**1 semester or .5 credit**	**course "unit"**	**TBD summer 2015**	**Varies by content area**

ridiculous record-keeping." Some practitioners mentioned that the language used in the CCSS document was not accessible for students and parents. In addition, one district leader indicated that the CCSS were too prescriptive in their requirements for certain types of assessment, "We adapted the Common Core [State Standards] in order to have wider assessment options. The Common Core tells you how to assess. It is too restrictive. We wanted to change our standards from the 'how' to the 'what' allowing freedom for creativity by teachers in how the standard is assessed."

Thus, all districts in this study have reference to the general domain groups of content standards from CCSS or NGSS for Mathematics, ELA and Science. Usually, these standards have been grouped together or consolidated using a combination of work from local practitioners, regional groups and external consultants. The organization of standards and designation of standards in which students must demonstrate proficiency to earn a high school diploma varied between districts. Although all districts referenced CCSS and NGSS, each district had a locally determined set of standards often adapted to language unique to their district. For example, one district defines its high school Mathematics high school graduation expectations, "Solve problems by using algebraic skills; create and apply mathematical models; work with and interpret data; understand and interpret functions, and reason using geometric concepts." Another district references seven strands in Mathematics, including one strand as Algebra delineated in four measurement topics: "1. Expressions, equations and inequalities, 2. Foundational algebra, 3. Interpreting functions, and 4. building functions." These two examples demonstrate the evident similarity of the original CCSS Mathematics standards as well as the local, district variation in organization and language.

It should be noted that this study did *not* conduct any type of analysis or evaluation regarding the quality, rigor or fidelity of districts' adopted standards.

Guiding Principles

In Maine's proficiency-based diploma law, Sec. 7.20-A MRSA §4722-A includes the following mandate: "In order to receive a diploma indicating graduation from secondary school, a student must...C. Demonstrate proficiency in each of the guiding principles set forth in department rules governing implementation of the system of learning results established pursuant to section 6209." The Maine Learning Results' six Guiding Principles referenced in this section

of the legislation outline skills and practices many educators call "habits of mind" or "work habits."

Again, districts adapted these standards to their local language. For example, one Guiding Principle from the original document indicates, "Each Maine student must leave school as: An integrative and informed thinker." One district had five high school graduation expectations intended to reflect elements of the Guiding Principles, including the following two standards: "As a [high school] student you will: Demonstrate critical, creative and innovative thinking; develop understanding through inquiry, research and synthesis." These two examples show the similarity of locally adapted standards to the original state standards. Although not all districts had crafted such specific or similar language, all districts had policies or proposals for addressing these Guiding Principles standards. Some examples of how students could demonstrate these standards included community service requirements, course work habit grades, and aligning assignments or rubrics to models outlining higher-order thinking taxonomies.

Grade Reporting Systems

As part of larger school improvement efforts, some districts had embraced new grading systems that reported student progress in terms of their demonstration of proficiency levels in a manner different from the traditional 0-100/A-F grading scales. Four of the case study districts (Districts A, B, D and E) had begun work at various stages of implementation to transition to a 1-4 grading scale. In many of these districts, a score of "3" represented "meets proficiency" and identified that a student was proficient in a standard required for high school graduation. However, some districts were still in the process of phasing in this system and were planning to begin implementation with a score of "2.75" or above representing the minimum score necessary for earning a proficiency-based diploma.

Some districts had chosen to maintain their traditional grading scale. These districts had identified a minimum score on the 0-100 point scale that represented "meets proficiency" and identified that a student was proficiency in a standard required for earning a high school diploma. As may be seen in the Overview Chart, this minimum score for proficiency varied among these districts, ranging from 70 to 88.

In addition, the high school graduation policies varied among the districts with regard to minimum requirements or how students demonstrated proficiency. Some districts required

students to demonstrate proficiency (at the designated minimum score) in certain standards at least once while other districts required students to demonstrate proficiency by earning a minimum score as an average in certain assignments. Other districts implemented a process of trending grade averages, with improving scores in more recent work being more heavily weighted. In fact, many districts in this study embracing new grade scales were still in the planning stages of implementation and had not established fully approved grade reporting systems yet.

This process included work to ensure that all students, regardless of their course-taking patterns, would engage in the necessary standards to demonstrate the minimum proficiency levels for high school graduation. For example, in Mathematics, certain combinations of courses offered at one high school would not include all of the standards required for demonstrating proficiency levels necessary to graduate. For instance, a student could take Math I, Math II, Business Math and Senior Math in his/her four years of high school, but these courses did not cover all of the standards in Algebra and Geometry necessary for earning a proficiency-based diploma in that district. Therefore, district leaders said policies and practices to rectify this situation would need to be developed, such as establishing prerequisites, allowing students to only register for course pathways that offered all required standards, developing alternative courses or changing course curricula as well as requiring some students to remediate through multiple course enrollment. One of the challenges raised by administrators was developing a system of clear communication to families and community regarding changes in high school graduation policies and systems for reporting student achievement and progress.

Multiple Pathways

It should be noted that all districts had extensive intervention systems in place for students who were struggling to demonstrate proficiency. In addition, all districts emphasized that students had multiple opportunities to meet any required proficiency levels in both academic and Guiding Principle standards. The method of these multiple opportunities varied among districts, but all districts provided students with support and several occasions to meet the standards required for earning a high school diploma. In fact, many district leaders indicated that strengths of this proficiency-based education approach was the school system's earlier

identification of students' need for academic support and development of a network of structures to provide assistance when necessary and in a timely fashion.

All districts in this study were providing multiple opportunities and multiple pathways for students to demonstrate proficiency in the standards required for earning a high school diploma. The systems in place designated as possible pathways to high school graduation varied among the districts, but every district leader could identify policies and experiences beyond the traditional course-taking patterns available to students. Many districts offered online experiences, such as Advanced Placement (AP4ALL), college courses and virtual learning. Most districts had policies in place to allow students to engage in independent studies, internships, research projects, and other alternative learning experiences in which they could demonstrate their proficiency in required standards. Often, students were encouraged or required to demonstrate the Guiding Principles through the documentation of approved experiences such as community service, capstone projects, and participation in extracurricular or co-curricular school activities.

However, it was noted that many of the opportunities for students to demonstrate achievement in academic content standards had been in place for years but were not widely undertaken by a large number of students. Administrators indicated that policies to approve out-of-school experiences were usually not yet in place at a whole school scale. For example, one high school principal said that several students were engaged in internships, but they were endorsed on an individual basis and required a cooperating in-school teacher to assess the learning. He said, "If suddenly one hundred students wanted to take part in this, we would have to have stronger guidelines and probably more staffing time dedicated to overseeing the work."

Common Assessments

A few districts approached the work to create a standards-based education system with common proficiency requirements to earn a high school diploma by developing core assignments that were common to all students in regular education, regardless of their course pathways. While classroom teachers often had the freedom to build unique curricula, connect various texts or provide differentiated scaffolding supports, this common assessment included the same task or prompt and scoring rubric for every child. Three districts in this study have embraced this practice and included required minimum scores on certain standards or the assignment as a whole in their high school graduation requirements. High school administrators in these districts

appreciated the "common language and common expectations" that "held kids accountable" and provided "increased communication among faculty, students and families," which they believed stemmed from this practice of requiring common assessments.

Some of these districts had courses with designated levels, such as Honors or College Preparation, and even within each of these levels, the common assessments were exactly the same. Another administrator said, "It holds kids to high standards for graduation. And any school can benefit from clarifying those standards for all students." Another district leader indicated, "It allows us to focus on the concept of being on the same page. It leads to greater collaboration." However, other districts had chosen to require "aligned, but not common assignments" so as allow greater creativity and personalization by classroom teachers.

Defining "Educational Experiences"

In Maine's proficiency-based diploma law, Sec. 7. 20-A MRSA §4722-A includes the following mandate: "In order to receive a diploma indicating graduation from secondary school, a student must... A. Demonstrate that the student engaged in *educational experiences* relating to English language arts, mathematics and science and technology in each year of the student's secondary schooling." Many of districts in this study were still working to fully adopt local policy that defined "educational experiences" and current policies usually still reflected the traditional credit requirements of high school enrollment and graduation. For example, the requirement that all students earn four credits of high school English to earn a diploma was still commonly practiced in these districts. However, since the law increased current policies that did not require students to earn credits in mathematics or science in all four years of their enrollment, some districts had not yet established how this would be defined within their proposed high school graduation requirements. One district had adopted graduation requirements that maintained their traditional credit requirements but also required students "to study [mathematics, science and ELA] in all of their years in high school." In this example, it was indicated that "study" could include enrollment in a semester or year course or an independent learning experience such as those mentioned in the multiple pathways section above.

Cross-Case Analysis

With the key features of proficiency-based diploma systems mentioned above as focal points, an analysis of all the practices and policies implemented or proposed in the case study districts was conducted to highlight some of the similarities and distinctions evident in approaches of the districts in this study. This analysis revealed that the following four **practices or policies are common** among all the school districts in this study:

1. ***All*** seven districts are using the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Mathematics and English Language Arts and Next Generation Science Standards to reference key content area benchmarks (referred in the CCSS document as "anchor standards") for high school graduation requirements and guidelines for PK-12 progression. Thus, as may be seen in Column A in the Overview Chart (See page 9), regardless of school district demographics, districts have adopted the Common Core Standards. In addition, the information in Column B of the Overview Chart (See page 9) indicates that in many cases, these standards are referenced in graduation policies but are often adapted, rewritten, summarized or abbreviated in working documents and student materials.

2. ***All*** seven districts are using the Maine Learning Results Guiding Principles to develop work habit and learning disposition standards for high school graduation requirements. Various strategies for meeting these Guiding Principles include compulsory community volunteering, service learning or opportunities for career or trade internships. Some districts are requiring students to complete a college application. In addition, many districts have implemented the practice of reporting work habits (such as timeliness of completing assignments, in-class participation, use of provided independent work time, demonstration of collaboration, etc.) separately from reporting the quality of work as it relates to specific content area standards. Therefore, Column C in the attached Overview Chart (See page 9) indicates that all case study districts have policies in place or being developed that directly align with the Maine Learning Results Guiding Principles.

3. ***All*** seven districts are working to define a grading scale with cut points for determining if a student has demonstrated proficiency in standards required for high school graduation. As seen in Column D of the Overview Chart (See page 9), three

districts have chosen to remain with the traditional 100-point scale and A-F grading system, however, as referenced in Column E of the Overview Chart (See page 9), they have aligned these scales with proficiency levels. Other districts have adopted or are transitioning to the implementation of a 1-4 grading scale, with a "3" delineating the minimum grade for demonstrating proficiency, as seen again in Columns D and E of the Overview Chart (See page 9). At this time, all seven case study districts have retained the practice of awarding credits, similar to the Carnegie Units method, although in some districts "seat time" is not mandatory for certain standards if proficiency can be demonstrated with submitted evidence.

4. ***All*** seven districts offer multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate proficiency in the required standards. This is outlined in Column F of the Overview Chart (See page 9). Some of these practices include assigned academic support (during study halls, designated intervention time, recess, or "non-core" classes), extended learning opportunities (after school, before school, summer and school vacations), online programming and individualized tutoring to revise assignments or re-taking tests until the student has demonstrated proficiency in all the required standards. In addition, ***all*** seven districts offer multiple pathways for students in their progression towards demonstrating proficiency, as outlined again in Column F of the Overview Chart (See page 9). Examples of pathways include traditional course-taking patterns, differentiated course levels, alternative education programs, independent study, online courses, internships, vocational programming, and others.

In addition to the areas mentioned above, all districts are working diligently to implement other components of their local proficiency-based diploma systems. While all districts are addressing the requirements of the mandated system, their method for implementation as well as practices and policies differ in certain ways. The four areas in which **practices or policies are not common** among the case studies' implementation are as follows:

1. ***Many*** of the districts are using the Maine Learning Results as reference standards in Social Studies, Physical Education, Visual and Performing Arts, World Languages and Career and Education Development. However, a few districts are developing their own

standards with assistance from education consultants, and some districts are adapting or adopting externally developed standards from professional organizations. For example, three districts in this study are members of the Maine Cohort for Customized Learning (MCCL) and have adopted this organization's "Power Standards," "Performance Indicators," and "Learning Targets." These components do originate from the Maine Learning Results in some areas but have been adapted by practitioners and education leaders. Some districts are adapting or adopting external standards from national organizations such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages or from other states' existing standards. As indicated in Column B of the attached Overview Chart, none of the case study districts reference the national standards verbatim. Instead of copying the language word-for-word from the original document, most districts use abbreviated phrases to refer to overarching standards and locally developed, child-accessible language to explain how the student should demonstrate the standard.

2. ***Many*** of the case study districts are defining the mandatory "educational experiences relating to English language arts...in each year of the student's secondary schooling" (S.P.439-L.D.1422: Sec.7.20-A MRSA §4722-A) as the equivalent of a one-credit course (full year or semester). However, ***some*** case study districts are defining the mandatory "educational experiences relating to...mathematics and science and technology in each year of the student's secondary schooling" (S.P.439-L.D.1422: Sec.7.20-A MRSA §4722-A) as a course unit or one half credit (semester course) or an independent study. As seen in Column I of the Overview Chart (See page 9), definitions of "educational experience" seem to vary in districts, and three districts have not yet developed these policies. Among all case study districts, recommended course-taking patterns appear to be more traditional and prescribed in grades nine and ten, while some districts are exploring college courses, experiential learning, internships and other alternative "experiences" for students in grades eleven and twelve. Not all districts have aligned all of these options with common standards at this point. For example, if a student engages in the traditional course pathway of enrolling in Physics in her junior year and Chemistry in her senior year, the standards are clearly outlined. However, if a student opts to engage in Physics her junior year but an internship at a local science lab during her senior year, the logistics of

aligning her work to standards and assigning a qualified educator to assess her work have not been clarified with regard to the internship experience in some districts.

3. ***None*** of the case study districts have exactly the same academic standards delineated as the required minimum demonstration for high school graduation. Five of the districts have required standards in English language arts for all students in their district, regardless of their course taking patterns or pathways; the remaining two districts are in the process of developing these common standards in ELA. As can be seen in Column H of the Overview Chart (See page 9), three districts have core assignments common and required for all students in the district, regardless of their pathways in all three content areas: ELA, Mathematics and Science. Two districts are still in the process of developing curricula and assessments aligned with standards. Two other districts have standards aligned to individual courses, but not all possible pathways culminate in the same combination of standards at this time although this is proposed for future implementation.

4. ***None*** of the seven case study districts in this study have the same definition of proficiency or description of the cut point for determining demonstration of proficiency. As seen again in Column D of the attached Overview Chart (See page 9), three districts retained 100-point A-F grading scales. Each of these districts has a different minimum score for determining proficiency: one district defines proficiency as a 70/C- or above, one district defines proficiency as an 80/B or above in core assignments and the third district defines proficiency as 88/B+ or above per content standard. While four of the districts have developed or are in the process of developing 1-4 grading scales, none of the correlating descriptions or standards was exactly the same between districts. For example, one district defines proficiency in ELA as demonstrating proficiency through "Level 11" standards, which were commonly referred to as eleventh grade level standards. Another district references some but not all "secondary grades" Maine Learning Results performance indicators while a third district uses locally-developed student learning objectives for grade 12 to identify the benchmark proficiency levels for high school graduation. The apparent level of the required minimum standard also varies by content area.

In essence, this preliminary cross-case analysis of a sample of Maine's school districts suggests that there is a common foundation of content area standards in English language arts, mathematics and science originating from national standards. However, the interpretation of these standards into proficiency levels and high school graduation policies varies across school districts within the state.

Policy Recommendations

1. Many districts are still at the developing stages of building a proficiency-based diploma system. Therefore, a key recommendation is that the ***State continues to provide resources and consistent guidance to school districts*** for this on-going work.

2. In fact, districts undertaking this mandated state policy as an effort to improve their schools' and students' performance were finding that changing the beliefs, logistical systems and traditional practices was a challenging endeavor. Although much of this work may not be actually required by the law, these districts were using the legislation as an impetus for systems change. As seen in existing literature and findings from Phase I and II of this study, school improvement and systems change are long-term endeavors that required sustained efforts and resources. Even in districts that were maintaining more traditional practices instead of larger reform efforts, there was an evident need for ***consistent direction and guidelines about the fundamental requirements of meeting the law***.

3. Considerable concern was raised among school and district leaders with respect to how this mandate would and should relate to Maine's work to develop educator evaluation and school accountability systems. Many practitioners cited the challenges of implementing multiple new state policies concurrently. Thus, it is recommended that ***the relationship and implications of current education policies be further examined and articulated*** in order to provide relevant support and guidance for implementation.

4. Substantial variation in the definition of proficiency required for high school graduation is allowed within the law and does exist among Maine's districts. It is

recommended that policy makers ***review the law and actual practice with regard to the initial intent to determine if adjustments within the policy would be appropriate***.

Conclusion

Participants in this study indicated that building a proficiency-based diploma system had encouraged more professional collaboration in schools, improved transparency in communication about student achievement, and inspired school improvement efforts in some districts. Yet, implementing this state policy also required substantial professional work. School and district administrators also suggested that greater clarity and consistency with regard to the required components of the law would allow for more efficient use of resources and time. Districts were evidently working diligently to align PK-12 curricula and policies to their local standards as well as developing common language and expectations within the district. However, comparing the academic content standards and definitions of proficiency from various school districts across the state identified many practices and policies that were not common statewide. Changing high school diploma requirements can have significant implications for school districts that should be recognized, analyzed and understood as they are implemented.

Appendix A

Figure 1: Working Conceptual Model of a Proficiency-Based Diploma System