The brave, new world of standards based education

by John DeWitt, JHB parent

"Dad, I'm almost done my MA 7 thru MA 10, Unit 2 standards. I stayed in from recess to finish the rest of my SU standards but I need to go to a seminar to get from 2 to 3 on most of my ECO standards. Mr. Reardon and I set a stretch goal for me and I think I can meet it by the end of next week."

If you didn't know any better wouldn't you think this was a university student interacting with their advisor on a class schedule? So where is this happening? At the Messalonskee High School? No. At the middle school? No. This is happening, right here in central Maine, in the middle of RSU 18 at the Bean School fourth grade.

That's right; nine and ten year olds are working within a structure that used to exist only at universities or in the business world. And they are getting it right. Instead of forcing content at the students at one speed with vague goals measured by cookie cutter tests, the kids are now involved in their own education.

This test bed program took a calculated risk and it has paid off big time. Skilled, dedicated professionals (the fourth grade teachers) structured a standards-based system for nine year olds then set a high bar, expecting excellence. The kids have risen to the challenge. The measure of success here is whether the student absorbed and mastered the knowledge. Better yet, the student sets the pace (within reasonable boundaries, they are after all nine year olds) and collaboratively decides the goal.

How do I know all this? My son educated me.

I have had an opportunity to look at this effort from a parent's point of view and a community leader's point of view. I currently serve on the District Leadership Team as we move in the direction of a standards-based system. There is much work to do. The road will be long but it is an essential trip the entire community must take and one in which we will all benefit once the destination is reached. In fact, it may be a continuous journey; we are still defining the path.

The facilitated meetings and excellent resource material and books are all outstanding and make a compelling argument, but this all pales in comparison to the best argument of all; that it is working. How do I know? When my nine-year-old son comes to me (without prompting) and tells me enthusiastically how he likes school; that is huge. A child who is willing to give up a recess to meet a standards goal speaks louder than a hundred education experts. And a boy who is happy with a '3' but then pushes himself to get a '4' on a standard is more motivating than any speaker could possibly be.

In the end, the true measure of success will not be a system in place or standardized test scores that are the envy of all around. It will not be awards of excellence nor shiny new technology. The true measure will be every single child happy, engaged and learning information at their speed that is valuable to them and applicable to their life now and well into the future. When every child is thirsty for more knowledge on their own, then we will have truly succeeded.