

# The Power of Principals

## Regional School Unit 20 Student-Centered Learning Implementation Case Study

*Regional School Unit 20 (RSU 20) comprises the schools of Belfast, Searsport, Belmont, Northport, Frankfort, Morrill, Swanville, Searsport and Stockton Springs – towns which had previously been parts of MSAD 34 and MSAD 56. On a map, the RSU has the look of a hub and spoke, with Belfast and Belfast Bay at the center. Its towns thrived as part of the once-booming commercial region defined by the bay and the Penobscot River. Those towns now struggle as the region has taken hit after economic hit over the past two decades. In this way, the towns of RSU 20 – and their schools – are not dissimilar to many others in Maine.*

*The district has an enrollment of approximately 2,500 students in 13 schools (plus an adult education program), with a budget of approximately \$29 million. Over the past two years, the school board has embraced proficiency-based/learner-centered education, though not without controversy. Though this is new for the district as a whole, work in individual schools has been going on for many years. The elementary schools of MSAD 34, for example, adopted standards-referenced practices in the early 2000s. Troy Howard Middle School, in Belfast, began looking into formative assessment in 2006, and then followed the path of transformation all the way to a thoroughly standards-based, middle school approach. Searsport High School embraced a standards-based reporting system at around the same time, and developed an aggressive intervention system for struggling students. This system has become a model looked to throughout the state. These are but two examples of a movement that spread through the district.*

*This case study explores how the RSU 20 has navigated the implementation of this model up to this point. For this case study, 18 administrators and educators, from a variety of buildings and grade levels, were interviewed in November and December 2012.*

### Context

In the fall of 2012, the alliance of towns that made up RSU 20 still felt new to its members. The marriage between the districts that had been Maine School Administrative District #34 and Maine School Administrative District #56 had been rocky. Complaints about being “forced by the state” to consolidate were common.

In the year after the consolidation, during fairly savage budget cuts throughout the state, then-Superintendent Bruce Mailloux had been tasked with proposing a reorganization plan for the RSU, to think as if the district were “a blank canvas.” The plan delivered the required cost savings but called for the closing of some smaller, “outlying” schools and significant changes in where students would attend. All high school students, for example, would be sent to Belfast; all middle school students would be sent to Searsport; the elementary schools, which had been K-6 or K-8 up until then, would be reorganized as PreK-2 or 4-6, etc. The result of this proposal was that resentment of the new RSU metastasized into a series of genuine withdrawal movements. Through 2012, these consolidation and withdrawal issues continued to take up most of the attention of the RSU 20 school board.

And yet the district, under the leadership of new Superintendent Brian Carpenter, insisted that, despite the politics of district and town, RSU 20 students would continue to benefit from an excellent, 21<sup>st</sup> century education. In the midst of the conflict over consolidation and withdrawal, Carpenter and Curriculum Coordinator John McDonald moved the school board to firmly embrace proficiency-based/learner-centered practice. The board unanimously supported a future vision that included a commitment to continuous improvement and a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all students. The future vision advocated an educational system that is, among other things, standards-based PreK–12, provides multiple pathways to meet standards, and meets the needs of all students.

Three things led to the proposal of this vision. First, as presented, it represented the personal educational vision of Superintendent Carpenter. Second, in the spring of 2012 the Maine State Legislature passed LD 1422, requiring all districts to issue diplomas that certified that students had demonstrated proficiency in all standards. Both Carpenter and McDonald agreed that this legislation provided leverage (and cover) for moving the district forward at that time. Third, within the district itself there have been bright spots of innovation, schools working hard and in relative isolation for nearly a decade. In these cases, rather than the district taking the lead, it has been the work of building principals. The early work at Troy Howard Middle School, Searsport District High School, and many of the elementary schools has become a firm part of the culture of RSU 20.

### **Searsport District High School**

One tenet of change theory is that an institution can change only when the necessity of that change is recognized by a “critical mass” of stakeholders. This often requires that the institution come to a moment of crisis, i.e., they need to see the necessity for change. For Searsport High School that moment came in 2003. At that time, the Searsport District High School went through the NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges) accreditation process, a two-year process involving a year-long self study conducted by the faculty, a site visit by the NEASC team, and an accreditation report that evaluated the school’s status and offered concrete and comprehensive suggestions for improvement.

Searsport paid a good amount for the privilege of being thus evaluated. They did so because the year of self-study – the faculty evaluating its own structures and programs – was seen as enormously valuable. Also, it was commonly understood that when the final report emerged, the citations of deficiencies would provide leverage when asking the community for resources to make necessary improvements. All of this was true. When, Searsport lost accreditation, the community noticed.

Gerry Crocker, a school coach who worked with Searsport District High School, explained, “The school lost its accreditation. Primarily, it was for the building but at the time...scores were tanking and kids weren't achieving. So the community came in and rescued, basically, the school.”

Clare Guse, a science teacher, remembered that the school “had just lost its accreditation...because of weakness in the facilities. The lab that I was working in was shared between two teachers, and it was pretty inadequate. That was part of it, along with the libraries. Because the accreditation had been lost, there was a big push for school improvement.”

At the time, federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR) grants were being made available in Maine under the flag of *Promising Futures* grants. Under the leadership of then Principal Gregg Palmer, Searsport District High School applied for and received a grant. This would be the first in a series of grants received through 2013. Through this early grant SDHS adopted comprehensive, systemic reforms, including heterogeneous grouping, advisor/advisee programs, and portfolios as demonstrations of student achievement. This was the first context in which the school encountered what was then called standards-based grading, upon which the *Promising Futures* model centered. Clearly this went beyond the criticisms of SDHS’s physical plant, but according to current Principal Brian Campbell, Palmer saw more essential problems that needed addressing.

“It came down to low graduation rate. It was in the 70 percent range.” said Campbell, listing the problems that beset the school. “Low college entrance rate. Low persistence rate. Underachieving on the state tests. Not being equipped with the requisite skills that kids needed to be successful at the next grade level. A tiered system that really separated the haves and the have nots. All those elements conjoined led to [Palmer] investigating what he could do to raise achievement, and raise engagement, raise test scores. Raise the graduation rate, lower the dropout rate.”

Between that research and the direction provided by *Promising Futures*, SDHS began a shift that was rooted in standards-based reporting. Searsport was one of the first districts in Maine to fully implement a standards-based report card. Though it would now be called standards-referenced, it embraced the then-controversial ideas that report cards should report on student achievement of standards, that standards should be clearly defined and transparent, and that scores for standards should not be averaged to produce a “course grade.” Courses, went the thinking, were vehicles for the teaching and assessing standards. By themselves they meant nothing. The standards were the statements of what students needed to learn. The algebra standard was explicit and

descriptive of this need. The course names – Algebra 1 or Algebra 2 – were neither explicit nor descriptive. The standards (the Maine *Learning Results*) were consistent throughout the state. The course structures changed from school to school, even within districts.

In order to ease public will, Palmer introduced the new reporting system to the high school a grade at a time. First ninth grade, then tenth. In the third year the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades were added. Despite their generalized support, this level of change – which included heterogeneous grouping, adviser/advisee, portfolios and standards-based reporting – was hard on both the faculty and community. Palmer attempted to bring them along by engaging them in regular, deep conversations about the practice and the ideas behind them. These began at a retreat given by the Great Maine Schools Project (facilitated by the Great Schools Partnership).

Asked where the real change started, teacher Jeff Shula said, “I’d go back to the Great Maine Schools [conference]. The meetings we had at Point Lookout, where a small group of faculty along with Mr. Palmer, started to brainstorm what a school – a standard-base school would be like. We started talking about doing away with grade levels....We didn’t end up doing that, but that gives you an idea of how open the conversations were.”

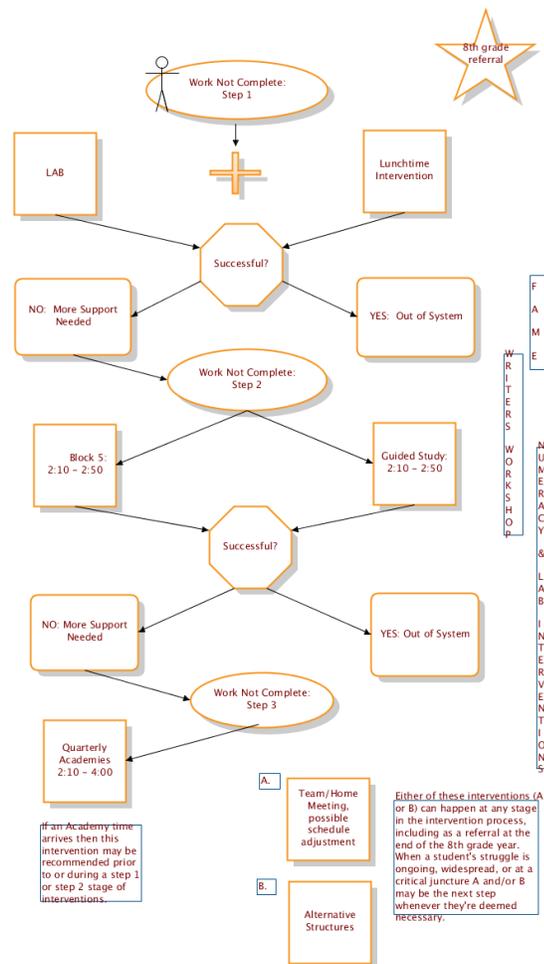
Conversations like this were ever-present and ongoing. They allowed the culture of the high school to navigate the tension between top-down leadership and grassroots engagement. Every participant of this study recognized the work of Gregg Palmer as the leader of this shift, but they also described a shift in which every stakeholder took part in both the conversations and the hard work. The heavy lifting began. Departments identified standards to be met in particular courses, wrote rubrics, and designed units. Massive amounts of professional development occurred, and many faculty meetings were spent discussing the implications of standards-based reform. In addition, Palmer wrote a number of essays explaining his understandings and posted these to the Searsport website. These were widely read by faculty and community members and soon were being read around the state. (See resources)

But there was something missing. The work they had done up to that point focused on two questions, 1) what should kids who graduate from Searsport District High School know and be able to do when they graduate, and 2) how shall we design curriculum, assessment, instruction and reporting to ensure that they do know. There was a third question, though, that they hadn’t yet addressed: What will we do if a student does *not* know what they need to know?

In response to this question, Searsport devised its *system of academic interventions*. Kathleen Jenkins, ELA teacher at SDHS, said, “When we went to standards, we realized the goal is that every kid’s going to get threes [i.e., meet the standards] by the end. And some kids are going to take more time and going to need more support. So how is that going to happen? We figured out this intervention system.”

“They just invented it out of need,” remembered Gerry Crocker, the school coach who worked with the team that devised it. They were “really interested in how you support kids who struggle to meet the standards. They were trying to come up with a system for informing each other about what kids know and can do. I said, ‘It almost feels like you need to systematize this so that you can guarantee [meeting the standard]. What’s your bottom-line for kids? Can you all agree that if a student doesn’t pass in a homework assignment, or hasn’t reached *meets* on an assessment that you will require or mandate an intervention to be done?’ And that was a huge breakthrough. We spent the rest of the day crafting this wonderful system for being consistent with students, for delivering that message to teachers, and then creating an electronic system for tracking kids. And once they had it perfected they took it to the whole school, and over time, the entire school adopted it. It was organic.”

The intervention system, illustrated by the flow chart (right), developed two branches: skill-based interventions, for when the student was not getting a standard or learning target, and behavior-based interventions, for when the student was choosing not to complete assignments. In both cases, it was seen as essential that the intervention occur as soon as possible after the need was recognized, certainly during the same day. It was also seen as essential that the whole faculty adopt the culture of these interventions, that no one in the building would let the student off the hook, essentially saying, “It’s OK if you don’t meet this standard.” The faculty agreed. It was not OK for a student to choose not to meet a standard.



Principal Brian Campbell describes Palmer’s work as incremental. Aside from phasing in the reform a grade level at a time, the ideas were brought in at intervals, rather than as one large package for faculty to contend with. Nonetheless, every participant was fully aware of how much change had occurred at Searsport District High School. More so, they were aware that a culture of change had developed at the school that would not go away. “We’ve been in a constant state of change,” said Clare Guse.

Part of that change has been in the form of scaling their system out from the school. Most locally, the standards-based/interventions system moved into the middle school (which shares a campus with the high school) two years ago, and this year it has moved to Searsport Elementary School. More widely, districts from around the state and from around the country have come to Searsport to see the model in action. Until he left as principal, Gregg Palmer regularly traveled to talk about the change to support other districts trying to improve.

During the fall of 2013 faculty took on the task of rewriting the school’s entire bank of standards based on their experience of the past half-decade. They are developing power standards: a year-long project, grouping standards together into logical bundles and selecting those that are deemed essential or non-negotiable for graduation. They are implementing programs providing multiple pathways for students to achieve standards (early college, internships, etc.), and having a serious discussion about developing a more learner-centered approach to standards. This conversation was similar to the conversations at the beginning of the shift. One teacher, for example, discussed Bea McGarvey and Chuck Schwahn’s book, *Inevitable*, and wondered how the individualized plans of that model compared ethically to the core curriculum model that the school embraced when it undertook this work.

In fall of 2013 Searsport High School began, once again, the re-accreditation process with NEASC.

### **Troy Howard Middle School**

Troy Howard Middle School, in Belfast, also had its critical moment. In 2003, Kim Buckheit was hired as principal. “The building was in disarray [in many ways],” said Buckheit. “It was a bit of a viper’s den” with “bullying occurring on many scopes and scales.” The faculty had upheld a “vote of no confidence” on the prior principal. As importantly, the school had failed to make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) for a number of years and was multiple levels into the CIPS (Continuous Improvement School) list. “Scores were, in general, around the 30 percent range, both reading and math, in terms of proficiency.” Troy Howard Middle School was reeling under climate and achievement issues.

Buckheit’s first year there focused almost entirely on climate issues, building relationships and trust. They partnered with the University of Maine’s Department of Peace and Reconciliation Studies and began to look into the Restorative Practices Project of the Midcoast. The point of this first year was to build relationships while assessing needs for “everyone who walks through the door.” It was also crucial that the year be “appealing,” that it alter the negative atmosphere that had developed in the previous years.

As the second year approached, Troy Howard Middle School realized it would need resources. Though the school hadn’t made AYP for consecutive years and had been labeled a CIPS school, they received none of the supports that might be forthcoming

from the State. CIPS sanctions only apply to schools receiving Title 1A (ESEA) support. MSAD 34, like many districts in Maine, had chosen to reserve its Title 1A funds for its K-5 schools. Buckheit advocated that the middle school be designated a Title 1A school, since it met the criteria for student free and reduced lunch levels. The board agreed. With that done, Troy Howard was able to create a math specialist position to support faculty and students; they were able to enter fully into work in Restorative Practices; and they were able to work with a Maine Department of Education consultant to plan steps for addressing systemic achievement issues.

There was a lot they could have focused on. By the third year, many initiatives were on the table to be pursued. They had already begun work with a math specialist and were looking at literacy work. Troy Howard's CIPS consultant was George Tucker, of the Maine Department of Education. He urged the school to choose one thing and focus on it, rather than dividing their energies. In the end they chose two things. First they focused on non-fiction literacy through a program conducted with the University of Maine (Orono). Secondly, they focused on formative assessment, the importance of which was becoming evident throughout the state.

Rick Stiggins' book, *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning*, was referenced a number of times in interviews as being essential to the shift in the school. For assessment, it is referred to at Troy Howard as "The Bible." Buckheit and a leadership team used CIPS funds to attend the "Assessment for Learning" conference in Portland, Ore., and made a connection directly with Stiggins.

"It was one of those opportunities," remembered Buckheit, "For those individuals that went, the passion was ignited. They felt, 'this is the right stuff, and this is what we need to be doing.'" One person from each of the school's teams attended the conference. When they returned "the original plan was that we were just going to do half of the building – in terms of being trained – going through [*Assessment for Learning*] for the year. You couldn't do it as a quick book study. Rick was very clear. You had to do it for a year. At the time we had five interdisciplinary teams. We were just going to do three [the first year], and then the next year do two. But after that conference, we wondered, 'Is it fair to kids that they have to wait a year before their teachers begin to use best practice?' We felt, 'It doesn't make sense. We just want to go school-wide.'"

Carla Fancy, a Troy Howard teacher who attended the Portland event, agreed that they came back with tremendous enthusiasm. "It was very exciting. We were totally into it, our whole group. We would go to the sessions while we were there, and then we would meet back in the afternoon and gather and talk. We brainstormed a lot of ideas while we were there. And when we came back...we understood that we were going to work with the teams that we were already working in. We already had a relationship, and each of us who had been to Portland would be the leader for that team. But it was less about our regular team meeting and more about coming together to really educate each other."

Shortly thereafter, the faculty of Troy Howard Middle School worked with Rick and Becky Dufour (authors of *Whatever it Takes*), and adopted their model of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for their conversations. Other teachers saw the value of

these moves quickly. Teacher Kevin Coombs didn't classify himself as an "early enthusiast," but he did feel, from the beginning, "it was a good program for our school....Everything that I learned from these groups coming back, and the literature that they gave out, the books that we read. It seemed like it was something that would help our school; it would make improvements in our school."

It was a challenge, instituting these reforms wholesale, rather than in sections or grade levels, or through pilots, but there was value to the fact that the whole faculty was involved. "Any of our staff," said Buckheit, "would tell you that it was pivotal in our change...that it was always occurring as a whole staff. All of our staff meetings, all of our discussion time, professional discussion times, are together in talking about these best practice elements. The way it ended up working was...it was basically one trainer per interdisciplinary team. [But] what had to be clear was that none of us were experts. We were all on this journey together. We were all novice."

As important as the increase in assessment literacy was for Troy Howard, developing this process for the whole faculty to address change was far more important. The adoption of PLCs as a model meant that the middle school had an effective model of communication that they could use to discuss even the most sensitive topics.

The years up through 2013 were a steady parade of change, most prominently the adoption of standards-based grading and reporting. This involved, according to faculty, many conversations about the implications of their traditional system, from its lack of equity to its inherent inability to truthfully report on student achievement. The issues explored in these conversations included separating behavior and work ethic from academic performance, averaging of grades, identification of course standards, record keeping, accountability, and addressing the problem of how to support this. Each of these moves involved in-depth conversations that continue to this day.

At the same time, the school adopted an "academies" model for grouping students. In this model, students were assigned to one of three academies – Ecology, Innovation or International – and have the bulk of their classes with the faculty of that academy. Aside from each focusing on a particular theme, the team approach supports the advisor/advisee structure of the school, and facilitates the PLC culture of the school. Also, just to pile on another initiative, Troy Howard has had to face the same challenges around the Maine Learning Technology Initiative that every middle school has had to face.

In 2012-13, the culture of change continued as the science teachers began pilots in customized learning. Teacher Kelley Littlefield attended a conference with Bea McGarvey (author, with Chuck Schwahn, of *Inevitable*) the previous year and felt that the approach reflected her natural teaching style. With Principal Buckheit's support she began formally adopting practices from *Inevitable* and reporting out on her progress to faculty – including in a video posted to the school's website. (See resources)

A number of participants noted the dichotomy in the school culture between principal leadership and shared leadership. A vibrant PLC culture evidenced a shared,

progressive vision and execution, but opting out of that vision was not an option for teachers. Principal Buckheit’s strong moral and positional leadership was frequently remarked upon, as was her impact on the composition of the staff over the past years. Buckheit has assembled a faculty that largely shares her vision and energy, and she leads with a mixture of both tight and loose methods. This has been effective. As one teacher put it, “It’s great to have a boss who says, ‘You don’t have to get in line and march with me, but you do have to be on the same page of music.’”

### **Belfast Area High School**

For decades, Belfast Area High School (BAHS) had seen itself as a successful and famously rigorous and traditional high school. The teachers of BAHS looked at Searsport District High School, and saw themselves as in tension with each other – “across the river” was the oft-used phrase. This tension did not disperse when the two became apart of the same school unit. Recall that when the district reorganization was proposed one plan was for Searsport District High School to cease to exist, become the regional middle school, and send all of the district’s high school students to BAHS. That did not occur, but the two high schools haven’t generally been able to work together in curriculum or professional development settings. Participants in this study, generally, were circumspect in discussing the tension. Still, when the school board voted to move the district toward a proficiency-based system, it was stipulated that BAHS would have to be allowed to find its own way.

With this commitment from Belfast Area High School, RSU 20 became entirely a proficiency-based system. As in the past, it was the building administration that was the locus of change. BAHS Principal Stephen Fitzpatrick led the move to apply for a MELMAC (Maine Education Loan Marketing Corporation) planning grant, which allowed the school to develop a plan to approach a variety of needs. Fitzpatrick also, with the support of the district, brought in school coaches from the Great Schools Partnership to facilitate the faculty conversation.

According to school coach Jean Haeger, the effort was more wide-ranging than implementing proficiency-based systems. “We did a data analysis session with a small leadership group,” recalled Haeger. “The learning committee and the department coordinators looked at some of their student performance data and identified the really high course failures and relatively low percentage of students going on to college and staying in college.” Haeger continued, “The action plan [for the first] year focuses on four areas...Room mediation and interventions is the one that they have been focusing on for immediate implementation. Standards-based, learning and planning. That’s been the department coordinators that have taken the lead with that. Aspirations [promoting student aspirations for graduation and college] is another – the group that’s coordinating the MELMAC work is taking the lead on the Aspirations work. And then the fourth area is professional development – the professional development that undergirds all of those initiatives.”

According to Fitzpatrick, the discussions showed that while the most struggling students and the highest achieving students were well attended to, the large swath in the middle, especially the lower middle, needed more attention in order to thrive. Fitzpatrick saw promise in the proficiency-based/learner-centered system, especially with its focus on multiple pathways. “It has a potential,” he said, “for student engagement, for student buy-in, for students owning their own education, and their own direction. And I think once you have buy-in [from students], whether you're an administrator, whether you're a teacher, I think you're halfway there.”

2012-13 has been the first genuine year of investigation for Belfast Area High School. Teachers have visited districts that “seem to be functioning” with a proficiency-based system, and they’ve found that they have to answer the same questions for themselves that every other district has had to answer. Questions are arising about the interactions of the new grading system with colleges. Questions are arising about the setting of standards for graduation, i.e., the practice of adopting power standards. “We had been told,” said one teacher, “that it had to be every standard. But these schools we’re visiting are picking certain standards that are most important. That’s a relief to us.” More importantly, it was a relief to see a school where a proficiency-based system actually worked. The teachers at BAHS have known that they will shift to a proficiency-based diploma – “It’s the law. This is not going away.” – but they have also been working hard to understand the foundations behind it. “But the understanding, the book learning, needs to be reinforced...by seeing it in action.”

Understanding the foundations and planning next year’s action steps have been the work of the year. The faculty has been hard pressed, but, as any number of participants said, “They’re professionals.” They have recognized that this initiative “is different from the stereotype. It’s not going away.”

## **Regional School Unit 20**

As much as the shift in Searsport District High School, Troy Howard Middle School, and Belfast Area High School has been a shift in structures, philosophy, and technique, it has also been a shift in culture. Part of that culture has been the isolation felt in each school. In each of their separate school departments, the two schools were operating alone. In MSAD 56, Searsport District High School’s issues were seen as something for them alone to handle (which, to be fair, was typical in Maine at the time). In MSAD 34, Troy Howard moved forward essentially under the radar, occasionally suffering condescension from parents and faculty of Belfast Area High School. At Belfast Area High School, as discussed, the culture was such that they “had to find their own way,” and have only recently begun.

This isolation was somewhat alleviated when the RSU came into existence. The faculties of Troy Howard and SDHS did eventually get together to share standards and resources. Also, districts all over the state have continued sending teachers to observe the two schools. These visiting districts have been interested in moving forward either with formative assessment, standards-based grading, or interventions. This was very

affirming. In 2012 and 2013, the state made its explicit commitment to proficiency-based/learner-centered education, with the *Education Evolving* strategic plan, and, especially, with the passage of LD 1422 (Proficiency-Based Diploma). The RSU 20 school board, as mentioned, has explicitly stated its support for proficiency-based/learner-centered education. The superintendent has included it as a central feature of his vision and five-year plan (also adopted by the board).

Meanwhile, the changes flowed through the elementary schools largely without comment. In the old MSAD 34, the elementary schools all adopted standards-referenced systems in the early 2000s, meaning that grading and reporting was done according to demonstration of standards, but decisions about advancement and placement were not. Jody Henderson, Principal of the Captain Albert Stevens Elementary School (Belfast), remembered extensive collaborative work done among the district's elementary schools. In Searsport, to the contrary, the elementary school was the last to begin the change to a proficiency-based system. Under the leadership of Principal Linda Bowe, Searsport Elementary School began its first year as a standards-based school.

Beginning with the freshmen class of 2014, the entirety of RSU 20 will be standards-based. To the extent that this is successful, it will be because buildings – their principals and teachers – took the initiative to examine, question and adopt best practices for their kids. If, as Assistant Superintendent John MacDonald hopes, the schools of the district can come together to actively support each other by developing a comprehensive preK-12 curriculum, and reinforcing instructional and assessment practices, then the system that develops – the culture that develops – will be considerably more powerful.