

## Standards and Local Curriculum: A Zero-Sum Game?

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*Many rural educators and researchers have not embraced standards-based reform warmly. Some are wary of standards driving out unique and locally responsive curriculum. Others cast standards as one more example of a reform largely geared toward urban and suburban schools but foisted on rural schools regardless of applicability. These arguments are mostly rhetorical. Few studies have looked at the effects of standards' implementation on the classroom practices of rural educators. In this paper, I examine the impact of a state standards-based reform, the Maine Learning Results, on curriculum and instruction in four rural schools. I focus on the impact that standards have on locally responsive curriculum in the schools. I suggest that state standards and locally responsive curriculum ultimately may not be as incompatible as many scholars and practitioners suggest.*

Rural educators and researchers view reform ideas of state or federal policymakers with much skepticism. Reforms often seem like solutions to urban problems or urban solutions to rural problems. Few look like policies crafted to support the unique situations of rural schools. Most are crafted from the outside. Consolidation efforts started over 50 years ago and continuing today are perhaps the best examples of reforms that constructed a rural problem and then sought to solve it with an urban solution. Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) write in their recent review of rural education research:

[M]any rural education scholars believe the rural school problem today is that generic, standardized modes of reform continue to predominate in education policymaking. The strengths and needs of rural schools have been largely ignored at the national level in conversations about school reform. (p. 72)

Given their history with reforms "from away," it is no wonder that rural educators greet new waves of state and federal reform with wariness. They question whether reform ideas designed—and mandated—for all schools are merely examples of change that in reality favor large, urban schools and make rural schools cater to national rather than local goals.

This paper examines a current state-level instructional reform in Maine and its effects on four rural schools. It explores the ways in which implementation efforts have changed school curriculum, focusing particularly on the ways in which locally designed curriculum has been affected by implementation efforts. It attempts to understand the relationship between state standards-based reform and locally responsive curriculum.

### What Researchers and Rural Educators Say about Instructional Standards

The state standards movement is relatively recent, so broad-based empirical studies of the effects of implementation of state standards on rural schools do not exist. However, rural researchers and educators have decidedly mixed views on the effects of standards on rural schools.

Last year, Rural Challenge organized an e-symposium on the topic. In this interactive event, many rural educators and researchers voiced suspicion over the effects standards might have on rural school curriculum. Perrone's (Rural Challenge, 1999) comments represent the sentiments of many who participated:

Small schools in rural areas have not been helped much over the years by standardization of various course requirements, which moves them away from their strengths. On their own, they would more naturally work from their strengths—their ability to make education more personal, the need to draw more heavily on local resources and use more of place as a basis for curriculum . . . What I see in many small rural schools are attempts to accommodate all the external mandates, including various curriculum frameworks and related tests to the detriment of higher quality teaching and learning.

For many rural educators the concern over standards is two-fold. First, standards are written by "distant experts" (Rural Challenge, 1999). They are externally derived by reformers who have little understanding of the unique resources and needs of rural communities. Bryant (Rural Challenge, 1999) describes the abundance of human and natural resources in the small Vermont community in which he grew up but which were unused by most of his elementary teachers. If standards

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had been in play when he was a student, he doubts that they would have helped this situation. He concludes, "they would have probably made the bad parts of this education more entrenched." State standards would not encourage Bryant's teacher to look outside her window and think about ways in which her curriculum could help her students understand or learn to protect the place in which they lived. Rather standards might draw her to a generic curriculum which could be taught anywhere and which fostered generic learning goals. Because standards are just that, standardized visions of what all children in a state need to know and be able to do, they are not grounded in any particular context. And if they were grounded in any context, they would most likely to be grounded in a nonrural one because rural educators and students are not well represented in the work surrounding standards.

Second, because standards often mandate an extensive curriculum for which teachers are held accountable through the use of state assessments, they drive out whatever locally designed curriculum rural schools may have developed. So, standards not only do not foster locally responsive curriculum, they actually do it harm. Shelton (Rural Challenge, 1999) suggests that "when standards are set apart from the communities, local initiative is killed, local ownership is killed." Julie Hansen (Rural Challenge, 1999) from rural Vermont raises the question, "How do we devise courses that make use of the community and local environment when we are expected to produce students who perform well on standardized exams?" These two concerns portray standards as an imposed curriculum which does little to enhance rural students' learning about their own communities and which may exclude efforts to teach students knowledge and skills which are vital in their communities and which may allow their communities to remain viable.

Other rural researchers and educators, although not necessarily disagreeing with the views expressed above, are less wary of the effects of state standards. Whereas state instructional standards may be promoted as helping students prepare for college or jobs in the "global marketplace" and rural school initiatives may be designed to help students learn about their own communities, the skills and knowledge students acquire doing both may be very similar (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). State standards and local initiatives may look more alike than critics suggest and implementation of them may not be a zero sum game. Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) write:

[N]ational education reformers and rural education advocates ought to be engaging in some dialogue about how the learning standards set by states and the possibilities for community may simultaneously be achieved. The sort of standards being discussed today do not have to drive students from their communities . . . students can develop higher order skills

in real-life situations by tackling community-based problems and issues. (p. 76)

Although concerned that in their current form state instructional standards and their sidekick assessments may ultimately not value locally responsive curriculum, these rural researchers and educators suggest that if there is flexibility in implementation, standards may support the work of rural educators rather than hinder them.

So, what is happening in rural schools which are in the midst of implementing state standards? What is the relationship between state standards and locally responsive curriculum in four Maine schools?

#### Description of State Instructional Reform and Introduction to Schools

In 1997, Maine legislators approved state instructional standards, called the *Maine Learning Results*, which set benchmarks for what students in grades K-12 should know and be able to do in eight subject areas. The standards are a comprehensive list of skills, attitudes, and content knowledge which represent for most school districts significant changes in curriculum. The most dramatic changes are standards for teaching foreign language and a comprehensive fine arts program at the elementary level. However, even within the core subjects (science, language arts, social studies, and mathematics), there are complex directives. For instance, the English/language arts section has eight content standards which have 202 performance indicators for students to accomplish by 12th grade. An example of a high school performance indicator in English is, "Identify complex structures in informational texts and the relationships between the concepts and details in those structures using texts from various disciplines." An example of a K-2 performance indicators is, "Demonstrate an understanding that reading is a way to gain information about the world."

School districts are required, by the spring of 2000, to present evidence that they teach to each of the performance indicators and standards and have devised local assessments to evaluate how well students have met the standards. This means every district has been involved in some kind of curriculum development work in the last 3 years. In many districts, all staff development time has been earmarked for complying with state requirements surrounding the standards. New state assessments aligned to standards were given in 1999.

The four schools in which I collected data are all in rural areas in the state with rural being defined as a town with a population less than 5,000. The schools are located in different geographical areas in the state.

Scofield is in a small, coastal town.<sup>1</sup> The major sources of income in Scofield are fishing, blueberry growing, and tourism. Scofield is not prosperous—it has the highest per-

centage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch (65%) in the county and the highest percentage of students identified as special needs. Scoffield's population has been increasing in recent years largely due to an influx of people from away—retirees and professionals who work out of their homes. This group tends to be better educated and wealthier than the local inhabitants. This group has also tended to take over civic offices. Scoffield's current school board, for instance, has no one on it who has lived in Scoffield for longer than 5 years. A new school was built in Scoffield 10 years ago. It is a K-8 school with 129 students. There is one teacher per grade level, a full-time principal, and four support teachers (physical education, music, library, and special education). Scoffield's students are tuitioned to two high schools in the area. The percentage of Scoffield graduates who attend postsecondary education is lower than the state average of 50%.

Walters School is a K-6 school with 107 students. It is located in the St. John's Valley on the Canadian border. The population is primarily Franco-American. French is spoken in the stores in town and most signs are in both French and English. The major industries have been logging and potato farming, but farming has been in decline for some years. Tourism is taking over as a major source of income. Walters School has six teachers and a half-time teaching principal. There are no music or art teachers. A physical education teacher comes to Walters a few days a week. Walters is in a district which is comprised of many small towns. After graduating from Walters, students go to the consolidated junior high and high school which is about 15 miles away. More than 50% of Walters' students start some kind of postsecondary education. Many go to a branch of the state university system which is in the same town as the junior high and high school.

Quarry Island School is located on an island 12 miles off the midcoast of Maine. The island has a year-round population of 1,200 people, but swells to three times that size in the summer months. The school is a K-12 school of 195 students. There is one teacher per grade level in elementary school and, in many subjects, only one teacher per subject area for junior high and high school. All grades are housed in the same building. Most people on the island lobster or work in tourism-related jobs. The 1999 graduating class of 12 had 2 students who went on to postsecondary education.

Katherine Mills is a K-6 building with 150 students. It is a consolidated school—four neighboring small towns' schools were closed in the last 6 years to create Katherine Mills Elementary School and Katherine Mills Junior High and High School. It is located in the middle of the state in an economically depressed region. The traditional industries have been logging and paper mills. In recent years, all but one of the

mills has shut down and logging jobs have diminished. School population has also decreased greatly in the last few years. Last year the district lost more than 40 students.

### Theoretical Framework and Method

This work is framed by the perspective that practitioners' interpretations and implementation of policies are incidences of professional and organizational learning (Knapp, 1997). Policies by definition imply new learning (Cohen & Barnes, 1993), so to understand how and why policy ideas make their way into classrooms requires an understanding of practitioners' learning about policy ideas. Like all learners, practitioners filter new policy ideas through their previous experiences, knowledge, beliefs, dispositions, and the context in which they work. These features shape the ways in which practitioners construe policy ideas and the changes in practice that might be possible in response to the ideas (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Elmore, 1996; Jennings, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Because of this, understanding teachers' learning about and from policies and examining carefully the context in which they teach is critically important if implementation efforts are to be understood.

To examine what teachers thought of and learned from Maine's standards and how they were dealing with them in their schools, I interviewed and observed teachers and administrators in four rural school districts between January 1999 and February 2000. In the text that follows, all quotations not otherwise attributed came from these interviews.

I asked the same primary questions about Maine's standards and about locally responsive curriculum to all practitioners in the four schools, adding individual questions to understand better local concerns and issues. Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. They were taped and transcribed. Questions about state standards included ones such as: what practitioners knew about state standards and how they had learned about them; how they viewed ideas about teaching and learning proposed by the standards; what efforts their districts and/or schools had undertaken surrounding the standards, and how, if at all, they saw state standards influencing their own teaching practice and policies in their schools and districts. Questions about locally responsive curriculum included ones such as: what, if any, community-related activities and lessons did they use in the classrooms; how, if at all, did they or their school use the community or bring in community concerns/resources to their classrooms; what did they think about the relationship between their school and their community. In Scoffield and in Walters, I interviewed all the classroom teachers. In Quarry Island, I interviewed all but one elementary teacher and one high school classroom teacher. In Katherine Mills, I interviewed all classroom teachers except the two sixth grade and eighth grade teachers who did not wish to be interviewed. In addition, I interviewed the four

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms are used for names of all persons, schools, and towns.

schools' principals and superintendents and also at least one school board member from each district.

In addition to the interviews, I observed at least half of the teachers in their classrooms. The purposes for the observations were to help me understand the student populations better and to allow me to ask specific questions of teachers and administrators about the schools' curriculum. I was also looking for evidence of locally responsive curriculum. Although informal in the sense that they were not guided by a structured protocol, I took field notes for each observation.

Finally, I attended numerous school meetings, programs, and staff development opportunities in all four schools. I went to school board meetings, teachers' meetings, staff development workshops, and school plays. I went to a pee-wee basketball game in Katherine Mills and a community-produced play on Quarry Island. In Quarry Island, I worked for 4 days in the summer with a group of five teachers revising the English/language arts curriculum to comply with requirements attached to the state standards.

I coded interview transcripts and classroom field notes using four categories: practitioners' understanding of and beliefs about Maine's standards; practitioners' understanding of and beliefs about locally responsive curriculum; capacity building efforts connected to standards; and practitioners' perceptions of challenges to and of state standards.

In addition to interviews and observations, I analyzed school and state documents, the state curriculum frameworks and new curriculum standards, sample questions of the state's new assessments, school plans required by state legislation and district staff development plans.

#### School and District Responses: Three Answers to the Questions

Just as rural education researchers have mixed ideas about the impact of standards on rural schools, what is happening in the schools is also mixed. In the schools I studied, I saw examples of state standards both diminishing and enhancing locally responsive curriculum. In schools and in classrooms in which place-based curriculum was frequently relegated to the corners and housed primarily in enrichment activities, state standards pushed locally responsive curriculum even deeper into the background. But in schools and in classrooms in which place-based lessons and activities were an integral part of the curriculum, state standards contributed to and enhanced this curricular focus.

Finally, in schools and in classrooms in which curriculum development largely had been overlooked, state standards initiated conversations about what and how to teach which seemed to have the potential to increase attention to locally responsive curriculum. I offer examples of each of these situations.

#### Standards Marginalize Place-Based Curriculum

In all four schools, when I asked people questions about teaching students about their community or using the community as a part of instruction, the most frequent examples given were of enrichment programs which supplemented the "real" curriculum. Scoffield, for instance, plans a series of activities around local artists which highlights the artistic work done in the community. Last year, one of the artists celebrated was a children's book author who had written a number of books on local flora and fauna. Students spent a week not only engaging in literacy tasks with the author, but also spent time in the woods and shoreline surrounding the school gathering the same kind of information on the local habitat that the author uses in her books. Another artist was a local stained-glass craftsman who showed students how he derived inspiration for his work from the colors and shapes of the local environment. In Katherine Mills, teachers organized an exchange program with a school in the southern part of the state. Students from the southern school spent a week in Katherine Mills, and later on in the year, students from Katherine Mills spent a week in the southern school. To prepare for the exchange, Katherine Mills' students learned about their community and its history so that they could teach the visiting students about their area.

The teachers and staff members involved in these projects talked about the importance of giving their students experiences which highlight their communities and deepen students' knowledge of where they live. One Scoffield teacher commented:

We have children who have lived here all their lives but have no idea how special the place they grew up in is. They think everyone lives in places that are this beautiful. These lessons teach them to value who they are and what they have to offer the world.

But as valuable as these experiences are, teachers commented on the pressure they are beginning to feel to get through content the state standards mandate. They fear that these experiences will be squeezed out by the need to "cover" more topics. One upper elementary teacher commented that she may not have the luxury of presenting lessons that get students outside exploring their world or working with community people if she is going to be held accountable on assessments for the ambitious curriculum she sees the state standards implying. As she said, "If it's a choice between a walk in the woods and one more day on division of fractions, I have to ask myself 'Will they be tested on the woods?'" Other teachers echoed her concerns. The pieces in the curriculum which they think of as most tied to the local community are pieces which seem most vulnerable because of the demands to cover more disciplinary material required by the

state standards. Like Julie Hansen who was quoted above, these educators ask the question of how they can teach to new state standards and tests, and teach students a sense of place.

Most of these teachers did not talk about teaching the skills and information they see mandated in state standards through these experiential, locally responsive curriculum units. Why this is so is not clear. It may be a function of how recent the schools' efforts are to align their curriculum to state standards. Using open-ended, school-wide experiential activities to drive home skills and knowledge that students need to do well on state tests is difficult, creative, time-consuming work. It is much easier to plug the teaching of skills into more traditional, classroom-based lessons and units. The difficulty of doing anything else is exacerbated by the fact that many of the enrichment activities are designed and taught by people other than classroom teachers. Scofield's librarian orchestrates the experiences with local artists. Quarry Island's lessons on the ocean and local birds largely are taught by volunteers who work for a nature conservancy group. This means that the people most connected to place-based education are not necessarily people directly involved in redesigning curriculum to match new standards. When teachers converse about curriculum or work together to develop a curriculum which is aligned to state standards, these ancillary people are often not included, and the activities they teach do not come to mind. Because the demands to reconfigure curriculum to be aligned to state standards are so great right now, for rural schools' small teaching staffs work that requires new kinds of collaboration and inventiveness may be impossible. The flexibility and adaptations that rural researchers see as necessary to make standards and locally responsive curriculum compatible may not be possible in the initial stages of implementation. In the short run then, state standards may be eliminating from schools place-based instructional activities—or at least making them even more marginalized and threatened events.

That teachers said that place-based curriculum is primarily done through extra or enrichment activities rather than being at the heart of their curriculum is in itself problematic. The talk about locally responsive curriculum that I frequently heard from teachers and administrators hardly suggested that this curriculum was ever a central focus of their work. For instance, when I asked the Quarry Island vocational education teacher who is teaching a course in which students are building a wooden boat about locally responsive curriculum, he commented:

We don't do it [teach place-based curriculum] now, and it's certainly not because we are doing much with the standards. We're called the Quarry Island Vikings, but we act as if we don't even live near an ocean. We've never built a boat before. How can we call ourselves Vikings without a boat?

This teacher's comments reflect what might be expected—that on a daily basis in many rural schools there is not an overwhelming number of examples of place-based curriculum. Much of the curriculum in rural schools has for a long time been generic. Rex Brown (1991) comments about literacy lessons that he saw in rural South Carolina schools as anemic versions of suburban lessons. So the fact that place-based education is marginalized in many schools cannot be blamed on state standards. Nonetheless, the question of whether state standards help or hinder that situation is a legitimate and important one. The examples cited above suggest that Maine's standards, while not the cause of the demise of place-based instruction, make such instruction in these four schools less likely to occur.

#### Standards Reinforce Place-Based Curriculum

In the same schools there are many examples of the opposite effect. State standards have, in these cases, justified or reinforced locally responsive and locally designed curriculum rather than driving it out. I offer three examples here.

#### *Walters School's Elementary Foreign Language Program*

Despite the fact that many of the children going to Walters School were bilingual or native French speakers, until very recently French was forbidden in school. Older residents of the community recount horror stories of being punished or shunned by teachers for speaking French on school grounds or at school events. Some parents in the community stopped speaking French at home, except when older relatives were around, and did not teach their children the language. In the last 5 years, though, the community has sought to preserve its heritage and asked the school not only to teach French at all levels, but to integrate French language into the teaching of core subjects. Walters' teachers, many of whom are French speakers, embraced the idea and began to develop ways in which to carry out this program. Shortly after the initiative, the state standards endorsed teaching foreign languages in a substantive way in elementary school. Walters was suddenly a leader in the state. One teacher from Walters was put on the committee to define the state standards in foreign language and to help develop the state assessments. Teachers were given support to design activities which highlighted the community's Franco-American culture and which invited community members into the school to talk, in French, about their lives with the students. The bilingual program in Walters has become a defining feature of the school and done much to foster a sense of pride in its Franco-American population. The program undoubtedly would have continued without the state standards' stamp of approval but the reinforcement that the standards gave to the program also clearly had positive effects. As one teacher put it:

It's good for us to know that sometimes we do things better than schools in the "Other Maine" [a term, in this example, used to refer to the wealthier, urban, southern, and coastal towns in the state]. It was a real kick for us to have people visiting us to see what we were doing.

### *Middle School Ground Water Project*

Last year, two geology faculty members at a Maine college received a National Science Foundation grant which would allow them to collect ground water data throughout the state and put it in a central database. The project's goals were not only to develop an extensive database on Maine's ground water supply but to involve college and K-12 students and faculty in studying ground water issues. Part of the grant was to teach K-12 teachers in various locations in the state how to test for ground water and enter the data immediately into a database which they would then have access to and could use for lessons and activities. Knowing that K-12 teachers are often overwhelmed with "good ideas" from well-meaning college educators, the geology faculty constructed the grant so that it was tied to the state standards. They picked middle school teachers because of a 6th-8th grade science standard in hydrology. They proposed activities which fit well with the performance indicators in the content area. They sold their proposal to school administrators, who in turn sold the idea to teachers, by showing how this work could help students understand water issues in their local communities and, at the same time, teach the state's learning objectives in hydrology. Their strategy worked. Three of the four schools that I studied became involved in this project.<sup>2</sup> Beginning soon, two middle school science teachers from each school will be taught how to use probes, drill wells, and come up with interesting questions about water quality in their towns which they and their students can then explore using the communal database. One of Katherine Mills' teachers said:

I know nothing about teaching ground water, so this project helps me out. I would have to teach to this standard any way. I think my students will love doing the hands-on activities and actually learning something about the area's water supply.

This example is one of state standards, albeit in a roundabout way, serving as a catalyst for place-based curriculum. Teachers in the three schools will be given the resources—i.e., time, expertise, equipment—to develop a locally responsive curricular unit which they might not have without this grant. The faculty members who wrote the grant used the fact that state

<sup>2</sup>Implementation of this project is underway as this paper is being written. Implementation in the rural schools has been slow, because of choices of project managers.

standards called for teaching about ground water as an incentive to participate in a project that teachers, although interested in it, might have otherwise refused.

### *Quarry Island's Boat-Building Class*

The vocational education program on Quarry Island has taught locally responsive curriculum for some time. One of the perennial goals of the program is to help students develop vocational skills to help them become productive members of their community. In the past, this objective was defined as helping students learn carpentry and basic repair skills that are needed on the island. Students spent their time learning to repair decks, fences, and garages. They also did minor house repairs for people in the community. Recently, a new teacher, Mike Jacobs, was hired for the program. Although skilled in many areas, he had years of experience building wooden boats. He was also familiar with the newly developed state standards for vocational education programs and liked them. He knew they advocated experiential learning and the development of lifelong learning skills. It was this latter call that made him question teaching kids to do household repairs as the major focus of the vocational program. He commented:

Yes, I want them to develop skills with basic carpentry tools, but there's more to it than that. I want them to learn the ability to work together for a shared product and to develop a sense of pride in accomplishment. What was missing when they did the small projects on the island was a sense of connection with what they were doing and a sense of a unique accomplishment. What was also missing was a sense of working on something that's beautiful. Hell, this whole island is beautiful. We need to work on things that are beautiful that fit here.

Jacobs designed a course in marine technology. His first class built a shed on school grounds for building a boat. In the second year of the program the group built a 30-foot, 6-man wooden rowing gig using a cold-molded process. Students in the class were involved in all aspects of the work. They chose the process they wanted to use and the materials for the boat. They lofted the design of the boat, and even built the sawhorses and station molds upon which the boat was built. The class of 6 students planned a large community celebration to launch the boat in the spring of 2000. Since the launching, the boat has been used by both students and community members. Both groups have participated in rowing competitions with boats built by other island schools and by other communities.

Unlike some communities in Maine, Quarry Island does not have a rich history in boat building, and Jacobs makes no claim that his class is teaching students traditional skills of

the island. But he does see the local community becoming involved in the work—or at least the product—of this class. He also thinks his students will develop in the class a wide-range of skills important to them if they want to stay on the island and be productive adults. Finally, he thinks the class teaches students a craft that is embedded in Maine's coastal history. Students have corresponded with boat builders in surrounding communities and have visited boat-building sites in New England. Jacobs talks of being delighted that this group of six students created an enduring, beautiful product for the community and school. He sees boat building as a vehicle to help his students become the kind of learners the standards seek to foster.

Unlike the first set of examples, these three examples do not display rural teachers or administrators feeling tension between locally responsive curriculum and curriculum aligned to the state standards. They have figured out a way to do both. There are undoubtedly differences in orientation and commitment on the part of the rural educators and developers of the state standards—their goals are not the same. For instance, teachers at Walters School did not intend to design a foreign language curriculum that fostered state standards and Mike Jacobs' primary purpose for starting a boat building class is not to satisfy state objectives. But in fact, in these three examples both place-based and state standard goals are fostered. These are cases of compatibility between locally responsive curriculum and standards rather than competition.

### Standards Initiate Conversations about Curriculum

Standards can also initiate conversations about curriculum which have the potential to foster locally responsive instruction. In all four schools, conversations about curriculum were rare. Most teachers said this was because they knew the other teachers so well, had taught with them for years, and knew what happened in their classrooms. Familiarity made conversation unnecessary and other concerns—discipline, bus transportation, school closings, special needs students—took precedence. When the state required all schools to examine their existing curricula to see if and, if so, how state standards were being met, it was the first time staffs in the four schools had sustained conversations about curriculum. These conversations revealed that their tacit knowledge was not always correct. Teachers did not necessarily know what their colleagues were teaching, nor did they recognize areas of overlap and neglect in their school-wide curriculum. For instance, four grade teachers in a few of the schools who had traditionally taught dinosaur units, had no idea that their third grade colleagues taught similar units. More than just figuring out gaps and redundancies, these conversations provided teachers opportunities to acknowledge, often for the first time, their colleagues' expertise in some content areas. A Scoffield teacher commented that the culture of the school had been

such that any sign of acting like an expert or tooting one's own horn would have been unthinkable. The meetings on curriculum and state standards required people to talk about what they do and, more importantly, talk about what they do well. This was not standard practice.

Most schools are in the process now of taking what they found in the initial conversations about curriculum and developing curricular units that will more closely align what teachers teach with the state standards. This alignment work is still very much in the initial stages and whether it will lead to more or less locally responsive curriculum is unclear. Let me discuss an example, though, of what is happening in one of the schools.

In the summer of 1999, I worked with a group of Quarry Island teachers examining the English/language arts curriculum. The work included many discussions on what students on the island needed in literacy skills and how what they learned in their English classes could be made more relevant to their lives. A piece of curriculum on which the group particularly focused was research skills. The teachers wanted to develop a coherent K-12 curriculum that would teach students how to write good research papers. The state standards call for sophisticated knowledge of writing expository papers using correct research conventions. A few of the teachers wanted to water down these standards because traditionally few of the island's students go on to college. These teachers felt that students do not need to know all about footnoting and citations. But other teachers felt strongly that students, regardless of their postsecondary plans, need to understand how to research a topic, how to support ideas with data, how to cite resources, and how to articulate their ideas in a persuasive way. This debate about what their students need was an enriching and thought-provoking exercise in itself. Teachers realized they did not always agree with each other and that they were often sending mixed signals to the students about what was important to learn in English. Through the conversation/debate teachers thought about curriculum as it applied to their classrooms and their students. The group came up with a research skills unit that is grounded in student interest and needs (many students are writing about lobstering, running a boat, building a boat, smelt fishing and so forth) but that requires them to demonstrate their learning of formal research skills.

This curriculum is far from perfected. In fact, the students hated many parts of it because they were hard to do. So the moral of this example is not that state standards necessarily induce curriculum work that will improve what students learn and be locally responsive. Rather, the moral is that, at least for this group of teachers, the state standards created (demanded?) an opportunity for them to focus on and to talk to each other about curriculum in a sustained and serious way—something that they had not done before. The potential for these conversations to result in stronger and locally

responsive curriculum seems present. Moreover, the fact that state standards “mandated” this change in research skills curriculum, increased teachers’ commitment to see this unit over some of the rough spots that the student resistance provided.

### What Makes the Difference?

The examples suggest that creating locally responsive curriculum and attending to state standards are not fundamentally incompatible aims, but both are difficult work. An image conjured up by some rural researchers and educators is that place-based curriculum needs to be protected from the intrusion of state standards, but these examples suggest another image—one in which both curricular reforms are fragile and both can be nourished simultaneously. But, what would rural educators need to do to have this happen? I offer these thoughts, based on this preliminary research:

#### 1. *Time and a clear focus*

In a small school, there are so few people to attend to things that the ability to focus is a particularly critical element of change. In these four schools, discussions about curriculum which resulted in place-based core curricular units and standards-based curriculum were more likely to occur and be productive at times when rural educators’ plates were not so full. A constant theme in all my interviews was that rural educators are asked to do a great deal because there are so few of them to do the work of the schools. Scofield’s principal talked about his vigilance to preserve time to work on curriculum and the difficulty of doing so when he also needed teachers to do such things as work on a summer school program and serve on a town/school committee looking at student aspirations. With only 12 teachers, it is hard to sustain work in any one area and curriculum work of any kind is slow going. Walters School’s French program is the best example in these four schools of place-based curriculum that is school-wide and at the heart of the school’s curriculum. This was, in part, because not only did it have wide support from the community, but also the superintendent and principal blocked out other concerns as much as possible for a time period to allow teachers to make changes and to develop new instructional activities. Katherine Mills, except for involvement in the hydrology project, has very few examples of locally responsive curriculum and has done very little work on aligning curriculum to state standards. This is also a district that has, for the past 3 years, been mired in controversy over school closings and consolidation. The superintendent was quite clear that this controversy had consumed everyone and not allowed much emotional energy or time for anything else. Leadership and the ability (or opportunity) to focus energy are critical elements if place-based and standards-based reforms are to be implemented.

#### 2. *Reexamination of long-standing assumptions about curriculum, colleagues, and state policy*

In these four schools, most teachers have taught together for a long time. Many have not taught elsewhere and many were born in the local community or have lived there for many years. This is not atypical for rural schools (Stern, 1994). The cultures that have evolved in these schools are ones in which unspoken assumptions about teacher beliefs, teacher expertise, the role of state policy, and about existing classroom practices abound. Familiarity does not breed contempt but it does foster silence and a sense that there is little left to learn from each other. This kind of culture is anathema to any rethinking of curriculum, whether it be rethinking curriculum to be more locally responsive or to be more aligned to standards. Implementing state standards forced teachers to question tacitly held assumptions about who taught what, who knew what, and what students should learn. This was very evident in the work with Quarry Island English/language arts teachers. They were genuinely surprised by differences within their group about curriculum and goals for schooling. The differences led to a more careful examination of the English curriculum than had occurred in the past and at least created an opportunity to redesign curriculum to be locally responsive and standards-based. Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) suggest that rural educators and education reformers need to engage in dialogue about how learning standards and community needs can be achieved. These examples suggest that this kind of dialogue may also have to happen within rural schools themselves. State standards can become an unwelcome outside influence that forces schools to react. The reaction, though, is not always negative.

#### 3. *Rethinking of ideas about how best to teach the skills and information standards call for*

Many teachers saw differences in ideas about teaching and learning that underlay place-based curriculum and those which underlay standards-based reforms. These teachers talked about locally responsive curriculum as interdisciplinary, often times experiential, process-oriented, and frequently involving work outside of the classroom or with outside people. They talked about standards-based reform as bounded to particular disciplines, skill-oriented, and content-driven. Mike Jacobs, the Quarry Island vocational education teacher was the only teacher I interviewed who articulated how he saw these different perspectives fitting together. Perhaps this is a function of the subject area he is teaching, but Jacobs saw how the skills and content that he felt responsible for teaching, and that he felt standards called for, could be achieved through an experiential, place-based curriculum. Creating opportunities for other teachers to see this fit seems critical if both place-based and standards-based reforms are to take hold in rural schools. To create these opportunities

we can draw from the abundance of research done on helping teachers learn to “teach for understanding” while they develop student skills. Teachers may need vivid images of what this kind of teaching might look like in their classrooms (Cohen, 1995; Knapp, 1997; Wilson & Ball, 1996). They may need to experience this kind of instruction for themselves (Duckworth, 1987). They also may need greater and a different kind of subject matter understanding to be able to maneuver ways through the disciplines that are not sequential, controlled paths (McDiarmid, Ball & Anderson, 1989; Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987). This kind of staff development work is very different from the standard fare that happens in schools. But if these learning opportunities are available, place-based and standards-based curriculum that is broad-based and embedded in core subjects stands a much better chance of becoming established.

### Conclusion

The ideas expressed above are grounded in a study which examined efforts in four Maine schools. In rural schools in other states which have other issues and a different state policy context other ideas and questions may arise. The importance of these examples, though, is that they help us think about what might come next. If the rhetoric that standards-based and place-based reforms are antithetical is unquestioned, we are likely to miss good opportunities that could help rural educators embed authentic and rigorous place-based curriculum in their schools. If the rhetoric that standards will enhance rural school’s curriculum is unquestioned, we are likely to ignore the conditions and experiences that might be necessary if standards are to enhance local needs. The examples in this paper suggest that rural educators can manipulate state standards to achieve their local goals but it is not easy work. Time, an absence of problems which divert attention, opportunities for sustained conversations about teaching and learning, and opportunities to question beliefs about how to best teach skills and content all might be necessary. These are not trivial “needs,” nor are they ones which Maine policymakers are currently seeing as important in implementing state standards.

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