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6-1-2016

## **Piloting PE/PG Systems in Maine School Districts: Lessons Learned**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Mette, Ian M. PhD and Fairman, Janet C. PhD, "Piloting PE/PG Systems in Maine School Districts: Lessons Learned" (2016). *School Improvement*. 15.  
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# Piloting PE/PG Systems in Maine School Districts: Lessons Learned



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June 2016

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Orono, Maine



Published by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute in the College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine.

MEPRI was established to conduct studies on Maine education policy and the Maine public education system for the Maine Legislature.

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This study was funded by the Maine State Legislature, and the University of Maine System

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## Executive Summary

**Introduction** As part of an on-going effort to monitor the implementation of Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth (PE/PG) systems in Maine school districts, the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) conducted interviews in a sample of four districts to explore lessons learned from initial implementation of the PE/PG systems. This information complements efforts of the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) to collect detailed descriptions of the PE/PG plans from districts through a statewide survey.

**Methodology** Given that a comprehensive statewide survey of the PE/PG systems was already in progress in early May when we launched our study, we used interview methods to investigate some questions not fully addressed by the MDOE survey. For this purpose, we selected four school districts that had obtained approval for their PE/PG plans from the MDOE and that had piloted some components of those plans in 2015-2016. The decision to focus on districts that were among the earliest to obtain approval for their plans has the disadvantage of not representing districts that may be in an earlier stage of development and implementation of their PE/PG systems.

The district sample reflects variation in terms of district enrollment, number of schools, organizational structure, urban/ rural setting, and the professional practice models for teachers and principals they elected to use as part of their PE/PG plans. A total of 11 individuals were interviewed across the roles of superintendent, assistant superintendent, district curriculum coordinator, elementary and secondary principal. The broad questions for this inquiry were the following:

- What aspects of the PE/PG systems worked well in the piloting year?
- What challenges or lessons learned did districts encounter in piloting their systems?
- How are districts supporting professional growth for teachers and principals?
- What additional supports might be needed to facilitate full implementation?

Interview data were analyzed for themes related to these broad questions.

### Summary of Findings

**Successes.** The four districts were ready to implement different components of their systems, and planned to pilot other components next year. The piloting helped to identify the need for some modifications or refinements. Administrators from the four districts identified several areas of success and strategies that facilitated their effort to implement PE/PG systems. These areas included:

- ***Alignment with evaluation systems already in place***—The new PE/PG systems aligned well with district evaluation practices and professional development goals already in place, which facilitated gaining teacher buy-in and implementation. Districts were already moving toward a focus on supporting educators' individual professional development goals and needs and this system is consistent with that.
- ***Increased clarity in professional practice standards***—Teachers and administrators felt the professional practice models increased the clarity and transparency of professional standards and expectations in the observations and evaluation. This facilitated communication about growth plans and areas to improve.

- ***Success in limited piloting before scaling up***—Districts initially piloted components of their systems on a small scale, with a few teachers, then expanded gradually to more staff. They also focused initially on a few standards or elements from the professional practice models. This approach helped to identify aspects that needed modification or tweaking, the time and personnel needed to conduct the work, and allowed more time to generate buy-in from teachers and shared understandings of the elements.
- ***Online tools and resources to drive conversations about instruction***—Online platforms and other tools were cited as an extremely helpful and important facilitator for the implementation of PE/PG systems. Online systems provided an efficient way to archive data and evidence, facilitated communication, and also offers wide ranging resources for on-demand professional development to meet individual educator needs.

**Challenges.** The four districts also described several areas of challenge and concerns in implementing PE/PG systems. These challenges included:

- ***Difficulty and uncertainty about measuring student growth***—Districts expressed serious concerns about identifying valid and reliable measures of student growth for the purpose of educator evaluation, and indicated more clarity, guidance, and models are needed from the state to guide this work. Although state policy requires the state assessment to be used as one measure, administrators explained that the annual assessment is not well suited for measuring student growth and does not provide data in time for end of year educator evaluation.
- ***Substantial time commitment for district and school administrators***—Districts described the substantial increase in time for district and school administrators to manage the observations, evaluation and feedback. While they value this work and feel it will have a positive impact on practice and student outcomes, they are struggling to accommodate this work on top of a growing workload. Larger districts and schools plan to evaluate a portion of their teaching staff each year.
- ***Need for district level evaluation calibration***—Districts delegated evaluation responsibility to district and school administrators which facilitates establishing consistency in evaluation, but increases the workload for the few evaluators. Districts were continuing their effort to train principals in evaluation and to calibrate evaluation, though more work is needed in this area. The districts in our study had varying degrees of success in attaining consistent approaches to evaluation and use of the rubrics by principals.
- ***Ongoing changes to PE/PG and inconsistencies***—Districts indicated that state guidelines on PE/PG systems had changed and produced more work and uncertainty at the local level. Further, they identified some inconsistencies between the law and guidelines that need resolution and clarification. One example of this is the requirement to use the state assessment for the purpose of measuring student growth. Administrators urged for stability and streamlining in the state requirements.

**Support for professional growth.** Three themes were emphasized by administrators in the interviews:

- ***Emphasizing growth over evaluation***—While administrators in the four districts believed that evaluation was important and they were committed to strengthening their evaluation practices, they emphasized the primary goal of using evaluation information for the purpose of supporting educators’ professional growth. That process includes multiple observations, collaborative discussion and peer feedback, reflection, goal setting around a few selected standards or elements, action plans, and review of progress.
- ***Principals as instructional leaders***—District and school administrators noted the shifting demands of the role of principal—moving away from managing a school to becoming an instructional leader and coach. In this new role, principals model reflective practice for teachers, assist with goal setting and action plans, and provide resources to support teachers’ individual professional learning needs.
- ***Resources to support professional learning locally***—All four districts utilized online platforms and other tools to facilitate the evaluation process but also to access professional development materials and videos on demand. This had the benefit of reducing costs to obtain PD supports, was individualized, and reduced the need to travel out of district for PD. One district was also creating videos of their own teachers to demonstrate the elements of professional practice for both PD purposes and for calibration among observers.

**Additional supports needed.** Four themes emerged, however there were some differences in the kinds of support or action requested by districts.

- ***Need for greater clarity, guidance, and models for measuring student growth***—All four districts consistently agreed that their most significant need was to obtain greater clarity from the MDOE around the use of student learning objectives (SLOs), indicators, and selection of valid and reliable assessments to measure student growth. This is a major concern at the 9-12 grade level. Administrators were uncertain about what constitutes valid and reliable measures, and whether or not the state or local systems currently have assessments that are suitable for 1) measuring student growth over a school year, and 2) using for the purpose of educator evaluation.
- ***Need for continued state support for training and professional development on components of PE/PG systems***—Districts appreciated the state funding to support the cost of developing and piloting components of their PE/PG systems. One district used the state funds to hire a consultant/ trainer to assist with the process, and said this support had been very helpful. Other districts used the funds to support release time and professional development. Additionally, districts commented on the need for additional financial support to address SLO development.
- ***Need for additional state support for hiring assistant principals and instructional coaches***—Principals struggled with the increased workload related to teacher observation and evaluation. Further, districts see a need for increased instructional coaching in schools to support teachers and improve student learning outcomes. However, fiscal resources to hire assistant principals and coaches are quite limited in many districts. Administrators requested additional state funding to build capacity in this area to support both evaluation and professional development efforts.

- ***Increased stability and simplification in Maine’s PE/PG policy***—Districts noted that it has been challenging to respond to repeated revisions of the state policy or guidelines for PE/PG systems. They also pointed out some inconsistencies between the law and guidelines, which require resolution. They called for increased stability in the system, as well as stream-lining or simplifying the requirements as much as possible to make it more manageable.

**Conclusion and Implications for Policy and Practice.** Several conclusions and implications for practice and future policy development come from this study. Conclusions from this study include:

- ***Value provided by an evaluation tool that clarifies teacher professional standards***
- ***Increased transparency in the teacher evaluation process***
- ***Use of the evaluation tool to target professional growth***
- ***Concerns about SLOs as well as valid and reliable assessments to measure student growth***
- ***Increased workload for school and district administrators***
- ***Recent changes under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that remove federal requirements to use student data in teacher evaluation allows states to remove this from their own state-wide PE/PG systems***
- ***Need for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers to explore the impact of PE/PG systems and develop policy that positively impacts Maine’s K-12 public school systems***

Implications for practice from this study include:

- ***Clarify the role of Maine’s standardized test if it will be used within PE/PG***
- ***Provide more guidance and models for measuring student growth***
- ***Work toward stability in PE/PG policy***
- ***Continue to provide state resources to support PD and training necessary for PE/PG implementation***
- ***Provide additional support in the form of funding for instructional coaches and state-wide platforms to share local professional development resources that target professional growth***
- ***Address increased workload for principals***



## **Introduction**

As part of an on-going effort to monitor the implementation of Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth (PE/PG) systems in Maine school districts, the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) conducted interviews in a sample of districts to explore lessons learned from initial implementation of the PE/PG systems. This information complements efforts of the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) to collect detailed descriptions of the PE/PG plans from districts through a statewide survey. The interviews conducted by MEPRI explored district experiences piloting PE/PG systems in 2015-2016 and district efforts to support the professional development of teachers and principals. This information informs state policymaking in the legislature and MDOE.

## **Methodology**

During spring 2016, the MDOE solicited PE/PG plans from all districts statewide through an online survey. By the June 1st deadline, the MDOE had received submissions from 150 School Administrative Units (SAUs) and had reviewed and approved 60 of these plans. Nearly 50 more SAUs are expected to submit their plans as well. Given that the comprehensive statewide survey was still in progress, we designed a small study using interview methods to investigate some questions not fully addressed by the MDOE survey. For this purpose, we selected four school districts that had obtained approval for their PE/PG plans from the MDOE and that had piloted some components of those plans in 2015-2016. Only a small percentage of districts had submitted their PE/PG plans to the MDOE by early May when our study was conducted. The decision to focus on districts that were among the earliest to obtain approval for their plans has the disadvantage of not representing districts that may be in an earlier stage of development and implementation of their PE/PG systems. The district sample reflects variation

in terms of district enrollment, number of schools, organizational structure, urban/ rural setting, and the professional practice models for teachers and principals they elected to use as part of their PE/PG plans. Two districts selected the Marzano model for teachers, while the other two districts used either InTASC or the Danielson model. For the principal professional practice models, two districts selected the Maine Principals’ Association (MPA) model, one district used Marzano, and another used a locally developed model. A description of the district sample is provided in the table below. For the purpose of confidentiality, we do not include district names or identifying information.

**Table 1. District Sample**

<b>District</b>	<b>Enrollment Range</b>	<b>Demographic Descriptor*</b>
A	3,000-4,000	Small city
B	1,000-1,500	Suburb, small
C	1,000-1,500	Rural, fringe
D	400-600	Rural, remote

\*NCES code

We contacted district superintendents by email and followed up with a phone call to explain the purpose of the investigation. We requested an interview with the superintendent or designee most knowledgeable about the PE/PG implementation experience, and with at least one school principal. A total of 11 individuals were interviewed. Interviews were conducted by phone and in person depending on the district location, and lasted 60-90 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Table 2 presents the interview sample for this inquiry.

**Table 2. Interview Sample by Job Role**

<b>District</b>	<b>Superintendent</b>	<b>Assistant Superintendent</b>	<b>Curriculum Coordinators</b>	<b>High School Principals</b>	<b>Elementary Principals</b>
A		1			1
B	1		1		1
C	1		1	1	
D			1		2

The broad questions for this inquiry were the following:

- What aspects of the PE/PG systems worked well in the piloting year?
- What challenges or lessons learned did districts encounter in piloting their systems?
- How are districts supporting professional growth for teachers and principals?
- What additional supports might be needed to facilitate full implementation?

Interview data were analyzed for themes within related to these broad questions, and are summarized in the sections that follow.

## **Findings**

### **Successes with Piloting PE/PG Systems**

Across the four districts we studied, administrators indicated their districts were ready to implement certain components of their systems in the 2016-17 school year, while choosing to continue piloting other components one more year, as allowed by the state. One district was unsure at the time of the interview this May whether or not they would be ready to implement their teacher evaluation system next year. Table 3 indicates where these districts are in their readiness to implement the teacher and principal evaluation components of their system in the coming school year.

**Table 3. Readiness to Implement Evaluation Systems in 2016-17**

<b>District</b>	<b>Teacher Evaluation</b>	<b>Principal Evaluation</b>
A	Continue piloting	Implementing
B	Implementing	Implementing
C	To be determined	Piloting
D	Implementing	Piloting

Based on their one to two years of piloting experience, these districts have learned what is working well with their evaluation and professional growth systems and have made some changes along the way. At this point, these districts did not envision any major changes to their

plans, but only minor “tweaks” over time. Two of the larger districts with multiple elementary schools allowed for some adaptations at the school level. For example, these districts allowed schools to identify different local assessments to be used to measure student growth, and allowed principals to decide how widely to pilot and implement the evaluation system based on the number of teachers.

Several themes emerged in the interviews with district and school administrators as they described factors that facilitated implementation and some of the more positive outcomes of the PE/PG systems. These themes included:

- *Alignment with evaluation and PD systems already in place*
- *Increased clarity in professional practice standards*
- *Success in limited piloting before scaling up*
- *Online tools and resources to drive conversations about instruction*

Each of these themes is discussed in more depth in the following section.

*Alignment with evaluation and PD systems already in place.* The four districts had selected different combinations of teacher and principal professional practice models, and they largely felt that the PE/PG systems they were developing and piloting were well aligned with their established evaluation systems. District and school administrators said their evaluation systems would look familiar to teachers and it this would facilitate the process of learning to use and implement these systems. Further, administrators indicated that the focus on individual professional growth for educators was consistent with their own goal to support teachers’ and principals’ individual professional development needs. A district administrator shared,

It lines up with the customized learning that we were on a path for in our district for professional development . . . The professional growth plans identified in Chapter 180 line up with what we were already doing in the district . . . It’s a growth plan for teachers and the principal . . . Educators were identifying the needs, using data sets, then crafting smart goals and planning how to meet those goals. . . . This law forced us to get tighter

and smarter in doing this and how we can embed this in our everyday culture in our work with students.

***Increased clarity in professional practice standards.*** Administrators across the four districts emphasized that the professional practice models or frameworks provided increased clarity and transparency around the standards of practice expected for teachers and principals. This facilitated increased consistency in teacher evaluation and feedback. Teachers valued having clear standards articulated. Two administrators shared these observations,

We now have our articulated standards, which became more specific for evaluators and teachers . . . It wasn't as specific before. It has helped with transparency for the expectations when the evaluator goes into the classroom.

That was the starting point for principals and teachers to understand this is what we're looking for in good teaching. Maybe some best practices, those kinds of things. So that gave us sort of that framework to start with.

***Success in limited piloting before scaling up.*** Another lesson that districts learned in piloting their PE/PG systems was the benefit of going slow, and starting with very limited piloting before expanding to the whole school. One elementary grade principal said,

We started small . . . We had "voice and choice" how to do this. I think starting small was good . . . Some principals only piloted with two to three people, but in my school we did it with our leadership team, and then chose to try one observation with the whole staff. So we could learn from a small group first, then with the whole staff.

As a result of the limited piloting, the four districts feel ready to either pilot or implement their system school-wide with all teachers next year. The limited piloting allowed both teachers and principals to better understand the standards in the professional model, figure out how to use online platforms and tools for archiving observation data and feedback, and understanding how much time was needed to conduct this work. Principals realized it would not have been practical or feasible to observe and evaluate all teachers in their schools in the same year, particularly for schools with larger enrollments. Based on this piloting experience, the districts we talked with

said they planned to observe and evaluate principals and teachers on a multi-year cycle, so that only a portion of their teachers on continuing contracts would need to be observed and evaluated in a school year.

Another lesson these districts learned was the need to focus on only a few standards each year for the individual educator growth goals, rather than overwhelming teachers with numerous standards to work on. One elementary school principal explained,

All teachers in the pilot did a self-assessment and identified elements to focus on in their growth plan, and wrote out action steps. This was done in collaboration with the principal . . . We've talked about not over-doing it, not selecting too many elements, but a few.

One district also indicated they would also select one or more standards to work on collectively in their schools and this goal would help focus district and school professional development choices. As they move to get ready for full implementation, districts will expand the scope of the frameworks. This approach helped administrators and teachers focus their attention on fewer standards and to establish a shared understanding of the elements of practice before adding additional elements to the mix.

Another benefit of the limited piloting was that it allowed administrators to obtain more buy-in from teachers. Some teachers who piloted the system were more comfortable with the proposed changes, while others volunteered more out of concern about the new system. Teachers who were observed and evaluated using the rubrics were able to help communicate with their peers that the system was fair and helpful.

***Online tools and resources to drive conversations about instruction.*** Administrators in the four districts we studied appreciated the availability of various online platforms including iObservation, Teachscape, and Google Docs to store PE/PG generated data and facilitate communication. While administrators and teachers were still learning to use these tools and

explore their capabilities, they felt overall that the use of technology was going well and very helpful to support the implementation of PE/PG systems. One elementary grade principal commented, “iObservation has gone well. I like it. In pre-conference, we can communicate back and forth and it allows for peer review / comments or discussion back and forth.” A district administrator said of that same platform, “It’s a small universe. An online platform to hold all this evidence around the professional curriculum for teacher practice.”

Given the significant time involved for administrators to conduct the teacher evaluation work, and need for electronic storage of evidence, the online tools helped administrators manage this increased work and material. And, the various platforms provided the opportunity for peer communication as well as evaluators and educator communication. In addition to these benefits, these tools also allow evaluators and educators to access professional development resources as needed to meet individual needs.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

While there were many successes identified in piloting the PE/PG systems across the state, there were also challenges and lessons learned about how to improve the process. Across the four districts interviewed for this project, four challenges emerged as themes, namely:

- *Difficulty and uncertainty about measuring student growth*
- *Substantial time commitment for district and school administrators*
- *Need for district-level evaluation calibration*
- *Ongoing changes to the PE/PG system and inconsistency*

What follows is an overview of the challenges faced by school districts piloting their PE/PG system, as well as insight from practitioners in the field about how to remedy the challenges.

*Difficulty and uncertainty about measuring student growth.* One of the strongest themes to emerge in our interviews is the belief that current local assessments may not reliably

measure student growth and are probably not valid measures to be used for the purpose of educator evaluation. District administrators emphasized the lack of clarity and guidance on 1) student learning objectives (SLO) indicators, and 2) identifying or creating valid and reliable measures of student growth that would be appropriate to use for educator evaluation. A district administrator explained the lack of faith in using current assessments for PE/PG systems,

No one is comfortable with it being valid. I'm not sure they are valid indicators. . . . We're using local assessments for the most part. Teachers can use that as a measure, but the assessments were not designed for this purpose. These assessments were designed for formative information and to inform instructional practice.

District administrators commented that lack of guidance and clarity provided by the MDOE about SLOs and student growth measures leads to confusion and anxiety among teachers. In particular, there is uncertainty about how to measure student growth, particularly for coursework at the secondary grade level. A district administrator commented,

Our state assessments have been all over the board the last few years. So they're just not reliable. . . . If we had somebody where we said, "Okay we're not renewing your contract, and failure to make student growth data is the reason." I think that would be so easily challenged. . . . And so I just look at that as sort of a black hole of if we ever non-renewed based on that standard, we'd make lawyers rich.

A principal from a different district also raised the issue of districts using non-standardized assessments across the state:

And it's hard because there's not an assessment that's going to show, or if you're teaching anatomy, physiology and biology, like this teacher, there's no assessment that the state's giving me, that's going to show, you know, the junior year, when they take a science assessment in the spring, does not demonstrate to me that [teacher] is a very good biology teacher.

Districts had strong concerns about including student growth measures in the educator evaluation system, and some administrators stated that student growth measures should not be used unless there are standardized tests provided by the MDOE that assesses all end of course (EOC) exams



in the same manner (i.e. every Algebra I class across the state would give the same EOC exam and allow valid and reliable analysis of student achievement).

Another pressing concern raised in the interviews related to the use of the state assessment within the PE/PG system. Several administrators commented that while the PE/PG system requires partial use of the state assessment to evaluate teachers, the assessment is given at the end of the school year and results do not come back in time to actually use in teachers' summative evaluation. Further, the state assessment is given only once a year and cannot be used to measure student growth over that school year. Measuring student growth requires multiple points of assessment. Additionally, districts remarked that many of their local assessments were designed for the purpose of informing instructional decisions, not for evaluating teacher performance or ability. Given these problematic issues, administrators reported that teachers feel anxiety about how student growth is being measured, how that data will be used in evaluation, and whether teacher ratings might become public. One district administrator anticipated future court cases challenging use of student growth measures to evaluate teachers – a phenomenon that is already happening in other states across the country.

***Substantial time commitment for administrators.*** Another theme that was present in all of the interviews with participating school districts is the large time commitment placed on principals to implement the PE/PG system for teachers, and for district administrators to evaluate principals, particularly in larger districts with multiple schools. One school district commented the required work is “extremely weighty for districts,” especially for bigger districts with a large number of teachers in each school to be observed and evaluated. That being said, smaller and more rural districts will also face increased pressure on human resources in schools that only have one principal or schools that have a teaching principal. Several of the participating school

districts stated that they would not observe and evaluate continuing contract teachers every year, but on a multi-year cycle, particularly for teachers who are deemed to be highly effective based on previous evaluations and years of experience. As one district commented, acknowledging that teachers require different types of supervision based on professional need and ability would help improve the requirements of the PE/PG system and thus would streamline how principals are able to target instructional improvement efforts.

In a similar vein, participating districts also commented on the time commitment and the long-term vision of district leaders needed to target ongoing improvement. For example, one district commented that initially teachers and principals will need to get more training on what appropriate data analysis might look like and how this can be applied in an responsible manner that will help drive instructional improvement efforts. Similarly, another district cited the need to focus on one standard of growth each year rather than 12 different standards as an important vision of leadership if teachers are to be empowered to improve in their craft. As a result, if the time commitment of principals to provide supervision for teachers is dramatically increasing, there must also be a long-term vision of how the instructional feedback will drive school improvement efforts, particularly from the local level rather than from the MDOE.

*Need for district-level evaluation calibration.* Across the four districts we studied, administrators were the primary evaluators for teachers and principals. Principals evaluated their teachers, and district superintendents and assistant superintendents evaluated their principals. While the small number of evaluators may make it easier to establish consistency in evaluation, it also considerably increased the workload for administrators.

In order to provide valid and consistent teacher evaluation across a school district, principals need to be provided professional development opportunities to calibrate their vision of

evaluation as a district administrative team. Many of the participating districts shared their experiences in beginning these calibration efforts. However, more work is needed to identify the types of training needed, time required, and evidence collected to inform this type of work. Several districts reflected on the need to deepen their own understanding and application of how feedback provided to teachers helps drive professional development efforts. One example shared by a school district highlighted the difference of opinion between administrators on how to score teachers and what this means for targeting professional growth. Within this district, some administrators evaluated all teachers as highly effective, while others used the evaluation rubric as a tool to promote growth based on principal observation and teacher reflection.

Connected with the need to engage in district-level evaluation calibration are the resources required to support this type of work. Time and financial support will be required for administrative teams to calibrate their evaluation practices within districts to ensure reliable evaluation of district teachers. However, many districts do not currently have the fiscal resources to provide this necessary professional development, or to hire an assistant principal who could help validate and provide internal reliability to evaluation practices within a school building. Consequently, one unintended byproduct of the requirements of the PE/PG system is the need to address how school districts will ensure reliable and valid evaluation practices that will be seen as equitable by both teachers and administrators.

***Ongoing changes to the PE/PG system and inconsistency.*** While all the districts interviewed were excited about the prospect of using their PE/PG rubric as a tool to promote teacher growth, many were concerned about the continuous and ongoing changes to the PE/PG requirements. Trying to follow these changes, needing to adjust the PE/PG system in response, and explaining to teachers why the PE/PG system has changed, all causes anxiety and, as one

district commented, “it eats up energy.” In a similar manner, another district stated that the law and guidance from MDOE don’t always agree, which leads to confusion, and as a result districts believe the PE/PG requirements need clarity and simplification. For example, several administrators described teachers’ fears and concerns about how the teacher evaluation information might be used by the MDOE, and whether it will be published or used in a way that harms schools and educators.

As mentioned earlier, all participating districts commented how much the new PE/PG system has dramatically changed, and will continue to change, the role of administrators. With the ongoing changes to the PE/PG system, and the increased time spent evaluating teachers, many districts commented on the increased workload of principals. In addition to the evaluation responsibility of principals, time is taken away from other important aspects of being an administrator, such as building relationships with students and connecting parents and community members with the school. As a result, many districts commented that if the state makes any changes to the PE/PG system in 2016-17, the hope is that requirements are simplified and consideration is given to the many other important functions of a principal to ensure the connection of the school with the community.

### **Support for Professional Growth**

In order to support professional growth among teachers and staff, principals must be able to use the information collected from the PE/PG system to drive improvement efforts. Use of online platforms or tools that align with the selected professional practice models provided an efficient way for principals to provide feedback to teachers, facilitated peer feedback, and allowed principals and teachers to easily locate online professional development resources to support

individual growth goals and needs. Based on the interviews from this project, three themes related to supporting professional growth emerged, namely:

- *Emphasizing growth over evaluation*
- *Principals as instructional leaders*
- *Resources to support professional learning locally*

The information that follows provides an overview of how districts approached the task of supporting educators' professional growth.

*Emphasizing growth over evaluation.* One of the most profound insights provided by the four participating districts is how they perceive the use of the PE/PG system within their respective districts. All of the districts viewed the evaluation rubric as a tool for growth and the chance to engage teachers and principals in a self-reflective process on how to improve their own professional practice. For these districts, professional growth is seen as the heart of their PE/PG system – for one district, this belief is so strongly upheld that they refer to their system as “Professional Growth and Performance Evaluation,” putting growth before evaluation.

To engage teachers in their own growth, several administrators mentioned empowering teachers to do their own self-assessment, identify elements to focus on in a growth plan, and write action steps to measure their growth. In these models, this is done collaboratively between teachers and principals, and purposefully focuses on only a few elements each year. Using peer feedback as part of this professional growth process, teachers are able to engage in observations and have conversations with each other in a supporting environment. Thus, given the specific contexts of each PE/PG system, districts are able to help teachers have customized learning and individual professional development plans that have been identified through the observation process and value the individualized professional growth needs of teachers. Through the observation cycles, principals are also able to identify professional development activities that

target school-wide improvement efforts as well, providing a balance between the needs of individuals and the needs of the school building as a whole.

*Principals as instructional leaders.* In order to provide support for professional growth, principals must also be able to serve as instructional leaders who can provide feedback on providing engaging instruction and support professional growth with the necessary resources to improve instructional practices. Many districts discussed the changing nature of how principals are evaluated – namely the focus of the superintendent to support principals to be instructional coaches by engaging with teachers in conversations about instructional practices and encouraging teachers to reflect on their own instruction rather than relying on the principal to tell them how to improve their teaching. To accomplish this type of feedback and support, principals are shifting from a traditional mindset about being an administrator and what it means to *manage* a school, and instead focusing on practices that address what it means to provide *leadership* to a group of educators that empowers them to be reflective on their own practices.

To achieve these cultural shifts of practice that support professional growth, principals in the participating districts shared some of the technical tools they are using as a result of implementing their PE/PG systems. Several districts commented on the usefulness of online platforms or other tools to help collect data from classroom walkthroughs and observations, and the sharing of this data during faculty meetings to allow staff to “dig deeper” into what the data suggest and how this might inform improvement efforts. Another district shared their use of the Empower platform to collect information on proficiency-based education (PBE), which in turn informs teachers and administrators about possible professional development efforts they might decide to target. Through these efforts to support professional growth, principals are not only

using data to target instructional improvement efforts, but they are also serving as instructional leaders by empowering qualified teachers to examine their own educational practices.

*Resources to support professional learning locally.* To varying degrees, the four districts utilized web-based platforms or tools to access professional learning resources—such as print or video materials—to facilitate their effort to support teacher and principal professional development. While some districts used resources from platforms such as iObservation or Teachscape, others simply shared resources via Google Docs. These resources had the advantage of being easily accessed on demand, and could be selected to meet individual growth goals and needs. Teachers could access materials on their own, as they worked on their action plans for professional growth. Principals could also suggest specific resources in their evaluation feedback to teachers. Schools electing to work on certain standards collectively could choose specific resources to share and discuss together, to “dig deeper” into the elements of professional practice. One district administrator described how the iObservation platform facilitates both the observation/ evaluation process and supports professional growth for educators:

iObservation has an extensive library of resources on observation. It’s our tool to hold the instructional and professional practice evidence for a teacher. So the evaluator goes in to this online platform, and each element is there, to score a teacher, citing evidence, making notes . . . if an observer wants to support an element, the principal can reference a particular resource in the feedback to the teacher, such as an online video. Or a teacher can find a resource in that professional library.

One district talked about using another online platform called “Empower” to develop their own resources for teachers that are more “in-house”. They will include video clips of instructional practice from their own classrooms that teachers and principals can access for professional development. A district administrator noted another benefit of this tool: “Principals can use that as a resource within the school. What does it look like? . . . So we are calibrated across the district.”

Another benefit of using the online platforms and tools is that it carries a much lower financial cost for schools and districts than contracting for or purchasing professional development services or materials. And, districts located in more remote rural regions in the state may see reduced travel costs and time for teachers and principals to travel outside the district for professional development. One principal in a rural district including many communities and schools spread over a broad region commented, “With technology there’s no excuse for not getting professional development.”

### **Additional Supports Needed**

There were many similarities and some variation in the kinds of supports or policy actions that administrators requested from the four districts we studied. Four dominant themes related to supports needed for PE/PG systems included the following:

- *Need for greater clarity, guidance, and models for measuring student growth*
- *Need for continued state support for training and professional development on components of PE/PG systems*
- *Need for additional state support for hiring assistant principals and instructional coaches*
- *Increased stability and simplification in Maine’s PE/PG policy*  
*Need for greater clarity, guidance, and models for measuring student growth.* All four

districts consistently agreed that their most significant need was to obtain greater clarity from the MDOE around the use of SLOs, indicators, and selection of valid and reliable assessments to measure student growth. While there has been some regional training from the state on SLOs and different aspects of PE/PG systems, administrators were uncertain about what constitutes valid and reliable measures, and whether or not the state or local systems currently have assessments that are suitable for 1) measuring student growth over a school year, and 2) using for the purpose of educator evaluation. Some administrators recalled their struggles to develop valid and reliable local assessments under an earlier state mandate, and felt that this kind of work was beyond the



current level of expertise for most teachers and administrators, and beyond the available time resources.

Administrators consistently pointed out the difficulty of using the annual state assessment for the purpose of PE/PG, and requested further clarification on that issue. Another area of uncertainty was how to measure student growth at the secondary level. Administrators in one district emphasized their frustration in trying to get clear guidance from the MDOE on student growth for high school courses. They felt districts had been left to grapple with this on their own. This district pointed out the inconsistency in content and rigor for secondary-level courses across the state, and administrators advocated for the development of uniform end of course exams.

In one district, administrators suggested that the requirement to include student growth measures for the purpose of educator evaluation be made optional or eliminated altogether, given the questionable suitability of current PK-8 assessments and the absence of good measures at the 9-12 grade level. More work is needed to develop valid and reliable measures, and to support schools with professional development in identifying and using such measures.

***Need for continued state support for training and professional development on components of PE/PG systems.*** The districts we studied for this report appreciated the state funding to support the cost of developing and piloting components of their PE/PG systems. One district used the state funds to hire a consultant/ trainer to assist with the process, and said this support had been very helpful. The consultant was able to share lessons learned from previous work with other districts, informed the district about using online platforms, participated in team classroom walk-throughs and calibration training, and many other aspects of the piloting process. The district sees a need to continue training on the PE/PG system, and requested continued state support for districts as they continue piloting or implement their systems next year. Other

districts also agreed on the need for training on SLOs and other aspects of the PE/PG systems. Some districts used the state funding for release time for teacher professional development. For districts choosing to implement, it will be the first time they implement with all teachers or principals in the district, and all elements of the professional practice model. This is a huge scaling up effort, given that piloting has been very limited to date.

***Need for additional state support for hiring assistant principals and instructional coaches.*** The four districts we studied relied most heavily on principals to observe, evaluate, and provide coaching support to teachers. The time and expertise involved in doing this work is not trivial. Even within the limited piloting, principals struggled to manage the increased workload, particularly where most of the schools did not have assistant principals to assist with this work. In larger schools, this was particularly problematic, and district administrators would lend assistance in observing and evaluating teachers. Administrators were quick to point out that the requirements around educator effectiveness meshed with the shift to proficiency-based education. They see a need for increased instructional coaching in schools to support teachers and improve student learning outcomes. However, fiscal resources to hire assistant principals and coaches is quite limited in many districts, and the administrators we talked to requested additional state funding to build capacity in this area.

***Increased stability and simplification in Maine's PE/PG policy.*** Administrators noted that it has been challenging to respond to repeated revisions of the state policy or guidelines for PE/PG systems. They also pointed out some inconsistencies between the law and guidelines, which require resolution. Administrators described teachers' anxiety around the evaluation ratings and consequences, and said that continual change in the system increased that anxiety and

undermined trust in the system. They called for increased stability in the system, as well as stream-lining or simplifying the requirements as much as possible to make it more manageable.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the piloting of the PE/PG systems of the four districts interviewed for this study went well. First, the districts we interviewed expressed how much they valued having an evaluation tool to increase clarity in teacher professional standards. Second, the increased transparency in the teacher evaluation process has led to improved communication about how teachers can be reflective in their own instructional practices. Third, and perhaps most importantly, is the strong focus among teachers and administrators to use the evaluation tool in order to target professional growth. By emphasizing professional growth over evaluation, principals have increased their role as the instructional leaders of a school building, as well as developing professional development within district in order to meet the individualized needs of teachers.

There continue to be concerns about the PE/PG system implementation process, however. First, there are considerable trepidations about the use of SLOs, selection of valid and reliable assessments to measure student growth, and using student growth for the purpose of educator evaluation. Second, the impact of doing teacher observations and evaluations within the PE/PG systems has seriously increased the workload for school and district administrators. Districts may need increased funding for teacher leaders or assistant principals to assist with this work. Third, administrators commented on the opportunity and flexibility to alter PE/PG systems, specifically to take into account recent changes under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that removes federal requirements to use student data in teacher evaluation and allows these decisions to be made by each state. Fourth, time is needed to further explore the impact that PE/PG systems will

have on school districts, and a greater exchange of communication between policy makers, practitioners, and researchers is needed in order to develop policy that will have positive impacts on Maine's K-12 public school systems.

This study also has implications for education policy and practice in terms of the themes that emerged from interviewing practitioners who have begun to implement the PE/PG systems.

These implications are summarized here:

- There is a need for the state to clarify the role of Maine's yearly state standardized assessment. Specifically, questions have been raised about the validity of using of the state achievement assessment for the purposes of measuring student growth and for teacher evaluation.
- There is a need for the state to provide greater guidance and models for measuring student growth in ways that are valid and reliable—*if student growth is to be used in teacher evaluation*. It should be reiterated that administrators had strong concerns about including student growth measures in the educator evaluation system.
- Continued changes in the state PE/PG policy and inconsistencies create significant work and stress for school systems and educators. Complexity in the policy requirements create confusion and varied response. Greater stability and simplicity in the policy are needed.
- Districts continue to need state support for training and PD to continue the work of piloting and implementing PE/PG systems. The funding has supported the cost of trainers/consultants, hiring substitute teachers to create release time for teacher training, and other expenses related to developing and implementing new systems.
- Additional instructional leadership support is needed to support the professional growth of teachers and improved student learning and proficiency outcomes. Additional funding for instructional coaches would increase capacity for instructional guidance in schools and relieve administrators from the increased workload. Development of a single state-wide, online platform for professional development resources would support professional growth needs at the local level for all Maine educators.
- The increased workload for principals needs to be addressed. Increased funding of teacher leader and assistant principal positions, particularly for large schools, would help build the capacity for strong educator evaluation systems.

Finally, addressing these implications for policy and practice, the State of Maine will be better equipped to support the various PE/PG systems to ensure high quality instruction by Maine teachers.

### **Author Information**

Ian Mette is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine. His research interests include school reform policy, teacher supervision and evaluation, and bridging the gap between research and practice to inform and support school improvement efforts. Specifically, his work targets how educators, researchers, and policy makers can better inform one other to drive school improvement and reform policy.

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## Appendix A

### Piloting PE/PG Systems in Maine MEPRI Interview Questions

1. As a district, what did you learn from piloting your Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth (PE/PG) System this year?
  - a. What worked well? What was helpful?
  - b. What did not work well?
  
2. As you work to update and finalize your PE/PG system, what pieces do you plan to keep?
  - a. Can you speak to how student growth is included in the PE/PG system for teachers and principals?
  - b. How have student growth targets been determined?
  - c. What types of assessments are used to determine student growth (local, state, or other national standardized test)?
  - d. Describe the observation and feedback schedule for teachers and principals.
  - e. Can you please describe how peer feedback is used for teachers and principals? Who evaluates the principals in your district?
  - f. What are the biggest challenges related to implementing the evaluation component?
  
3. How are you pursuing support of professional growth for teachers and principals?
  - a. What is the process for identifying professional growth opportunities?
  - b. How does the process for identifying professional growth goals involve collaboration?
  - c. Have you piloted the professional growth component yet for teachers and principals? If so, what did you learn?
  - d. What are the biggest challenges related to implementing the improvement plans and professional growth plans for teachers and principals?
  
4. What additional supports, information, professional development will be needed to fully implement these systems (evaluation and professional growth)?
  - a. What components of the PE/PG system do you feel you are more ready than others to implement?
  
5. Is there anything we did not ask you that you wish we would have?
  - a. Is there anything else that you think is important to mention in regards to the further PE/PG policy development?