Good Afternoon.

I am writing this letter to contribute to your upcoming science standards review. I am hopeful that you have heard from many teachers that have been brave enough to stand up and say the standards are too high and this is why our state science test scores are so low. These standards are written in a way that is aimed at our upper 50% and are not inclusive of all students, including our students who have low comprehension, some special education students, and our students who have not received a solid foundation of science in the lower grades. This will be a disaster if we are moved to standards-based grading.

Standards should be written to apply to all high school students, including special education students who are unable to reach the current level of standard. These standards only account for a portion of the student body. Currently, approximately 15% of our school has some form of accommodation or modification. Many more than that need some help, as the special education students are not simply representative of our lower functioning students. A large portion of our students are performing below the level they need to be at across the board in English, math and science. Students, teachers, and special education teachers get discouraged by the high level of standard we are expected to bring these students up to. As a result, many teachers and special education teachers are modifying their assignments to such a degree that these lower students are not learning anything. Wouldn’t it be better to lower the lowest standard to an achievable level and have that group of students able to rise up to it? It is common knowledge that to motivate students, you must make the work attainable or the students will not try. We have so many of these students who are at this level and are giving up. This does not bode well for the future of Maine. Let’s give them attainable standards. Maybe the state could make standards based on a modified version of S.M.A.R.T. goals. Their standards should be specific, measurable, and attainable for sure.

The best way to counter this drought of science knowledge in Maine is to engineer the standards to enable teachers to build a solid science foundation, not force teachers to try to attain what amounts to impossible standards for many of our students. Maine has chosen to word the standards in a way that uses Bloom’s taxonomy action words to dictate the level of understanding each student must attain. In the real school format this is just unattainable. You are creating a system where it excludes a large portion of the student body and forces special education departments to lower the standards to middle school levels for many of their students. You use words like “evaluate, analyze, plan, and design”. Many of these students are not there yet. They are missing the foundation. As a result, only 15% of special education students are at or above the state’s expected level. That’s 14,206 students below state expectations out of the 16,714 special education students tested. Has the state excluded and given up on them?

Many of our students read at an elementary school level and their comprehension is low as well. If we are to bring them up to level, teachers need to be guided to teach foundations of science first. We need to allow the teacher to decide what level of Bloom’s taxonomy the students can achieve. If Maine goes to standards-based grading and the wording contains the exact level of understanding, this body of students will either fail or be “fudged” as administration at schools will refuse to let their passing rate numbers drop. The standards should be written as an absolute minimum standard to pass or graduate for everyone. We need to stop allowing the special education departments to change the minimum requirements for their students because it cheapens the diploma for those who have struggled and
achieved it. Potential employers who will interview students who have diplomas but have been exempted from the lowest minimum standard and are very low will see that the diploma now means nothing. So when a person who has earned it and met the standards shows a diploma, the potential employer may not hire them. Special education students comprise a large portion of our students in Maine. They will eventually go out into world and get jobs and families. It is our job to prepare them for the world, not exempt them from the rules. Please write standard which start at the lowest standard to graduate and then teachers can differentiate up for their higher students.

Additionally, the list of standards is written so complicated that when a new coworker started and sat down to map her curriculum she started crying. Science teachers are usually very fact-oriented and function better with charts, like organization, lists, and not wordy convoluted statements. We need a list of topics to cover, not a mixed up group of statements that pick and choose parts of cohesive units. Also, the standards should match the state test. Teachers will have more time to make engaging activities and lessons, give meaningful feedback, and perform best practices if they have clearly written, simplified, and organized standards. If we are to go to standards-based grading, it should appear more like a checklist and less open to interpretation.

In conclusion, in preparation for standards-based grading, please simplify the standards, make them into a checklist, lower them to the lowest acceptable level to pass or graduate, and when we do switch to standardized grading, keep an eye on administration pushing teachers to pass both regular and special education students and blaming teachers who can’t get them to this level.

Thank you for your time.

-Jennifer Clark

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