It's been over 20 years - thank you for the opportunity to comment on the MLR specifically, and the Standards Movement in general. Like any guideline, the MLR have organized curriculum over the past two decades. Yet in combination with the concurrent federal initiative of high-stakes testing mandated by No Child Left Behind, the standards became ambitious, competitive, and unrealistic. Ambitious in that no days were added to the school year, yet the curriculum now ranged from "figures of the 20th Century" to comparing them to those of previous centuries. Every grade level taking the MEA, NECAP, SBAC or EmPowerMEA has been under pressure to not just deliver their own locally-determined portions of the Content Standard and Performance Indicators (as now blended with the Common Core), but to also prep kids for anything that might come their way on the test. The resulting lessons? Tedious with detail, or too broad, and not meeting the kids' developmental needs. Middle schoolers were expected to not only to learn about their world, but rather to become experts on its past, and to write sophisticated, on-demand responses when asked about such matters. No mere summaries would do here, but fully-developed, 7-paragraph essays were expected by the SBAC. Since no minutes were added to the day, and no days were added to the school year, kids just lost their recess, as budget-cuts took away any hands-on classes such as HomeEc or Shop.

Competitive standards? We are guilty of standards chasing. The MLR was revised, then the Common Core adopted, and now the Next Gen Science Standards and the C3 Framework threaten to replace what remains of the MLR. They may indeed be improvements, but here's what happens at the local level. A state mandate is delivered to administration, who have no choice but to crack the whip on implementation. Existing curriculum? Throw it up into the air! As it comes down, reorganize it for all you're worth. Building level teams are re-structured, content is shifted to hit learning targets before the content shows up on a test, and what was gained? Professional development days served only this transition, while the loss of teaching relationships, the loss of developmentally appropriate tasks at grade level, the loss of experienced teachers who chose these latest initiatives as their reason to retire...the many losses outweigh any possible gains. If the gains are there, have they been measured on the MEA, NECAP, or SBAC? So we wait and wonder for the EmPowerMEA will be able to measure any success. Meanwhile, the Legislature and the DoE had other initiatives to promote. GLEs? Schools reorganized! SLOs? Teachers now document for many additional hours. MLTI? There's no time for that - let the technology integrate itself. PEPG? Conform district practice to the new protocols, but cut administration just as the hours required have tripled. When does it end?

With all these worthy, yet competing initiatives, the Standards Based reforms become unrealistic. The Legislature's choice to abandon the SBAC seemed to recognize that. Yet the cost saving measure of helping local districts pay for the NWEA as an annual assessment was not taken. Instead, the DOE has spent millions in developing its own test, most recently called the EmPowerMEA. The local districts still pay of the NWEA in order to supply data for federal programs like Title I and now the ESSA. See what happened to the kids in all this? We stopped teaching them. We got caught up in teaching the standards, and in order to measure our success (or lack thereof) kids are saddled with multiple rounds of high-stakes testing. Nearly a month of the school year is dedicated to these assessments, and test fatigue is the result. Students click through the screens, enter Submit, exit the test, and in the case of the EmPowerMEA, wait months or a year before they have any feedback. So much for the technology that was meant to offer timely results. The other vastly unrealistic aspect of implementing these standards has been the policy to accept late work. The intention was of course a good one: to allow each learner his or her own pace. In practice, however, screen-addicted teens would shrug off due dates, ending the term w/ hastily submitted work that in many cases forced schools to fund the time & resources for "standards recovery." What had students learned? Manipulation & procrastination -- not exactly the job-ready skills that Maine businesses have been promised with a standards-based diploma.

Teacher anecdotes like this are often dismissed as not being reliable. So let's look at the data. Test scores have plateaued, or follow a slow downward trend in reading, and a sharp downward trend in math. (My favorite data points for this view are the NAEP compared to any of our state-administered tests. As we have assessment-hopped, the NAEP has consistently documented the plateau or decline in 4th and 8th grade achievement.) The NWEA -used and paid for by many districts throughout the state, however, shows individual yearly growth. That growth may not meet a standard, but any teacher who finds Tommy in her class knows that to take an abused & neglected child from a 3rd grade level to a 5th grade level is a successful year. To hell with the 7th grade "standards" he's supposed to "meet." He's come a long way, and to deny that progress with constant negative feedback and labels of DOES NOT MEET, or PARTIALLY MEETS is just unfair & wrong. Praise Timmy to the moon for overcoming his homeless months at that cold campground, and let him know how proud you are of all the gains he has made. Give a sigh of
then we stood…leads to re -evaluation. And really what we want?!

She was absolutely right, and I could see that the kids had found another loop hole. None of the grades count until we do the last three assignments. How I would fit in 3 - 5 scores instead are considered more valid data. Without penalty parents accompanying them. I currently teach a Geography course that uses none of the geography content standards; administration preferred that the applications of SS standards be used. I have offered feedback to my students over the past 20 years using letter grades, 100 pt. scales, a 4 pt. scale, in combination w/ other markers such as N, PP, P, Pw/D, or DNM, PM, M and E. Confused? That was the feedback from parents. Conference were eaten up in translating the standards, and demystifying the rating scales. Little time left to talk about their child.

My daughter's experience offers another disturbing glimpse into the reality these policies have brought to the classroom. I might ask what is meant by Number Sense as a standard in Math, but she'll only shrug her shoulders. She's not sure if it means place value, computations, or even scientific notation. When I ask what the 3 means that she earned in Number Sense, she again shrugs her shoulders. She had tried to earn a 4, but some of her teachers warn that it's not always possible. You see, when tested, she got a 100, but that only receive a 3, because passing the test "met the standard." There was no way to exceed the standard, or earn a 4. There likely wasn't time. Sadly, some teachers are warned that they can't catch a child beyond a "meets" score. So my daughter often can't earn the old school "A." To her credit she has kept working hard, in hopes of still being on the honor roll. Now, that too, is in jeopardy. She earned honors in 7th grade, but to date the school has not printed an honor roll for her 8th grade year. I asked if she felt like something had been taken away from her, and she strongly agreed. "Mom, last year they said we would be able to earn Highest Honors, so I worked extra hard to have all my scores over 95, and to earn all 3s and 4s, but now we don't even have an honor roll." Is this really what the Legislature wanted? To take away incentives? To relay that excellence is unattainable? We have been hearing about honor roll and class rank being phased out, and it may have finally happened to my daughter. I am not seeing that this change came with any benefits. Instead, I see more draw backs. Consider other school policies that have slowed down the pace of the curriculum. Late work is allowed without penalty promotes procrastination. The average of all assignments is now discouraged, and the most recent 3 to 5 scores instead are considered more valid data. To me as a teacher that sounded reasonable, but I did wonder how I would fit in 3 - 5 assessments per standard when one quiz may have been all that time allowed before. My daughter gave me a different perspective: "Mom, when we work on a unit for two weeks, some of the kids know that none of the grades count until we do the last three assignments. They know they can goof off for 7 days!" I was stunned…she was absolutely right, and I could see that the kids had found another loop hole. Just like accepting late work w/o penalty encouraged procrastination, scoring only 3 days work out of ten meant kids took a week off. Is this really what we want?!

I have sent this plea to my delegation in Augusta before, but I will repeat it for you: Please, let's stop teaching standards, and get back to teaching students. Please stop the standards chasing. Adopting yet another set of standards leads to re-tooling the tests, grading scales, and even dismantling the existing structures we have to communicate and recognize achievement. If the testing data we've collected over the past 20 years is disappointing, then we have the Standards Movement to thank for two decades of poor performance.