Now that I seem to be building a relationship with some readers, it is time to own up to my hitherto secret purpose in writing this column. I want to see "VACATIONLAND" off the car license plates. I want to see it replaced by "The Learning State." Of course the point is not about license plates, which I suppose could be changed by decree from Augusta. It is about how we in Maine think about ourselves and our state, something that cannot be changed "top down" by government. It has to be created "bottom up" by the people of the state. By you and me and all of us.

It would be good for us to have the title of champion state in the field of learning. It would bring business and talent from away. But the driving reason to achieve excellence in learning is necessity. More than most states, our future depends on the capacity of the next generation to adapt to changing economic needs and possibilities. Mainers must be learners.

What would qualify us for the title is a combined score based on the quantity and quality of learning that takes place in the state and on our attitude towards learning and the role of learning in our future. On quality of learning we have a lot going for us. Although our schools have many problems, their students rank high on national tests. Outside of the curriculum itself the state is rich in nuggets of homegrown excellence in learning. As just one example drawn from a large collection I'll be sharing with you in the next months consider the fact that the kids of Deer Isle-Stonington have achieved national status in junior chess contests. And, of course, nobody would expect me to pass over the laptop initiative that has the eyes of the education world focused on our state.

On attitude we have work to do and this is where I hope to make a modest contribution through this column. Last December I wrote on these pages that the time has come for a change of ownership of the laptop initiative: it must stop being "the governor's laptop initiative" to become "our initiative." I outlined ways in which citizens could help and argued that only if many do will the initiative achieve true
greatness. But the same arguments apply to all learning. The quality of learning in schools will advance best if the quality of the "learning culture" in our homes and communities advances.

The "home learning culture" is reflected in how we talk about and think about learning in our families. In my column about Bode Miller I tried to show how one can see every event in the world through lenses focused on the learning aspect. In a family with a strong learning culture people who see skiers jump fifty feet into the air and spin their bodies all the way up and down might respond as I did; my wife and I spent the next ten minutes talking about how anyone could possibly learn to do that. The quality of the family learning culture also shows itself in the response to kids knowing more than the grown-up. When your eight-year-old figures out faster than you how to do something with the VCR or the computer are you embarrassed or proud? Do you try to learn from the kid? Do you recognize that kids are experts on learning and can often teach you a lot about how to do it?

I'm trying to use this column to set an example, but using a monologue as an example defeats my purpose. I want dialog. I want to see discussion of learning. Starting next week I am going to make a point of dealing directly with the comments of readers that have begun to trickle into my email. To make this work please send more comments. So please tell me why you think I am crazy to think that Maine can be Number 1 in learning.