Essentials of a Maine Education: Select Findings from Phase One of Maine Education 2050

Report Presented to:
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Maine Department of Education

Jennifer S. Chace

Jane M. Endres

Janet C. Fairman

Sharon L. Gerrish

Maine Education Policy Research Institute

April 2026

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

Center for Education Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation

MEPRI Maine Education Policy Research Insitute

Published by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute in the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research, and Evaluation (CEPARE) in the School of Education and Human Development, University of Southern Maine.

CEPARE provides assistance to school districts, agencies, organizations, and university faculty by conducting research, evaluation, and policy studies.

In addition, CEPARE co-directs the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI), an institute jointly funded by the Maine State Legislature and the University of Maine System. This institute was established to conduct studies on Maine education policy and the Maine public education system for the Maine Legislature.

Statements and opinions by the authors do not necessarily reflect a position or policy of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, nor any of its members, and no official endorsement by them should be inferred.

In complying with the letter and spirit of applicable laws and pursuing its own goals of diversity, the University of Maine System does not discriminate on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, transgender status, gender, gender identity or expression, ethnicity, national origin, citizenship status, familial status, ancestry, age, disability physical or mental, genetic information, veterans or military status in employment, education, and all other programs and activities. The University provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities upon request. The following person has been designated to handle inquiries regarding non-discrimination policies: Director of Equal Opportunity and Title IX Services, 5713 Chadbourne Hall, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469-5754, phone 207-581-1226, TTY 711 (Maine Relay System).

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

A Center of the
School of Education and
Human Development

140 School Street, Gorham, ME 04038
(207) 780-5044; TTY (207) 780-5646
www.cepare.usm.maine.edu
A member of the University of Maine System

Table of Contents

Background

Maine is one of many US states that purposefully locates control over curriculum and instruction at the local level. The State Board of Education and the Legislature choose the core subjects to be taught and how many days of instruction students will receive; the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) further defines what students should know and be able to do within each of the core subjects at each grade level; and local school administrative units (SAUs) decide how to teach their students so they can meet those state standards, choosing curricula and instructional methods, and establishing schedules and staffing plans. MDOE periodically reviews the state standards, a process in which they are currently engaged.

In Maine, the "Department of Education maintains state educational standards for Early Learning (Maine Early Learning and Development Standards, MELDS) and for grades PK-12 (Maine Learning Results, MLRs) in English Language Arts, Health Education, Life and Career Ready, Mathematics, Physical Education, Science and Engineering, Social Studies, Visual and Performing Arts, and World Languages, as well as the Guiding Principles for Learning, which describe the cross-disciplinary knowledge, skills, and dispositions all Maine students are expected to develop" (MDOE, n.d.)

An understanding of what aspirations and visions Maine people hold for an ideal schooling experience can provide helpful context and background for many of the Committee's decisions. And, indeed, the Committee may decide to approach improving Maine's educational system strategically, in partnership with the business community, community organizations, and the incoming governor's administration. In such a case, an orientation grounded in the big picture priorities of Maine people for our system of education can support the process.

This study asks what Maine people understand to be the essentials in PK-12 schooling and how they think schooling can evolve to provide those essentials. These questions are relevant in 2026. Most importantly, perhaps, the rate of change in our schools is much slower than the rate of change in the world. Public schools were not necessarily built to evolve quickly or be responsive to change; instead, reliability, consistency, replicability, security, and authority have been prioritized, as has been the case in many public institutions. However, students live in rapidly changing, international, social, technological, and economic worlds. To prepare students to succeed and thrive now and in the future, schools and the systems to support them need to evolve. The evolution needed must be in both substance and format, but also in structure to allow for perpetual adaptation to the needs and future visions of students and communities.

Myriad other challenges make this study's questions relevant. Current methods of student and school assessment generally do not reveal increasing achievement, and absenteeism rates indicate that there is likely a disconnect between what school is, what it prioritizes, and what students and their parents want and need in both content and format. Questions about high school graduates' readiness for the workforce and higher education have recently been asked. Tensions

between schools' focus on either career or higher education learning pathways have become heightened, especially in light of increasing costs of both living and college, regional demand for certain trades and professions, and the declining population in many rural areas. Finally, fewer students are choosing four-year universities, which indicates a growing demand for other forms of career preparation beginning in high school.

While recent achievement scores on the NAEP are disappointing, innovations have been seeded across the state through the MDOE's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) grants and educator design-thinking trainings, initiated during the pandemic. Things are moving in some places. Are these innovations moving in the general direction of what Mainers see as most beneficial? Identifying what Maine people value most and where we hope to be in the future can provide useful guidance to those defining goals and designing interventions in the coming years.

Finally, three events are converging in 2026-2027 which intersect with the topic of what Maine people consider to be the essentials of a Maine education. MDOE is currently engaged in a standards revision process, while the Maine Education Policy Institute (MEPRI) is seeking to define the essentials within the EPS school funding formula. And a new governor will be elected within the year. This study can contribute the voices of Maine students, educators, and community members to these timely investigations, and provide foundational understanding to a new governor's administration as they seek to build on the current governor's successes.

Purpose and Methods

This study investigates what Maine people consider to be the essentials of public schooling and how schools might evolve to provide such an education. The final year of this four-year study was conducted simultaneous to MEPRI's study of the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) funding model which sought to determine what changes or updates could be made to provide a more equitable distribution of state funds to school districts. The key questions for both studies are related: What should all young people encounter in and gain from their PK-12 education, and how can the state ensure all districts have the resources to provide that education to their students?

This study began with the broad question of what will youth need to thrive personally, civically, and economically in Maine in 2050. We took as basic assumptions that public education is a public good and that its purpose is dual: to provide individuals with the means to realize their aspirations for the "good life" as they define it and to provide Maine with well-educated individuals who will contribute to the civic and economic flourishing of our state. Youth, educators, parents, community members, and industry professionals all need to be consulted as stakeholder groups invested in considering the question and providing its answers.

We used a "design thinking approach," with a futures orientation for this study. Design thinking is a human-centered approach that focuses on exploring what humans want and need

and discovering the innovations that can best meet those aspirations by prototyping solutions quickly, assessing success, and adjusting course as needed. The five elements of the design thinking process are: Empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test. This study engages deeply in the first two, listening deeply to Maine people to understand their aspirations for themselves and their communities and the challenges to achieving those futures, including the resistance to change often found in public institutions that prize stability and the infrastructure that supports them. Specifically, this study asked participants to first envision the future communities and lives they desire and then, second, consider what types of educational experiences are required to reach those aspirations.

Methods

We used innovative research methods to gather and process data collected for this study. First, the approach is rooted in storytelling through semi-structured focus group conversations. The questions we asked were designed to prompt participants to reflect on and tell stories about their experiences, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding among participants of a wide range of experiences and a variety of hopes and expectations for education and schools in particular. Second, we gave participants access to the interview transcripts of their recorded conversations via a digital online platform, Cortico, which allowed them to deepen their experience of the conversation by reading the text, listening to audio, and annotating important moments in the conversation. (Participants could see others' annotations but not respond to them.) Participants' annotations also contributed to our data analysis, giving us critical information about what was most important to participants in the focus group conversations and why. We gained crucial historical context and heard nuanced reflections on simple statements through those annotations and the public sensemaking events we held from time to time, inviting previous participants to gather with others to discuss their conversations and takeaways.

We chose this methodology based on a project goal of strengthening feelings of mutual connection and empathy within and among communities across Maine through the experience of participation. A related concurrent goal was to build public will for investment in the evolution of public schooling, which we believe will be increased by increased understanding of the stories behind the needs of our fellow citizens.

Using the Cortico platform also enabled us to manage a vast qualitative dataset, including over statements and stories from over 1,000 participants. Our analysis was aided by artificial intelligence (AI) tools to help summarize and synthesize the data across more than 230 focus groups held in 16 counties with three different categories of participant groups (educators, high school students, and parents and other community members) each with a similar but different data collection protocol. Where we used AI is clearly described in the appendix, where our methods of data collection and analysis are detailed.

Cortico also enabled us to share our learning with the public in a way we've not before been able to do. Nearly every statement from every participant is cataloged, located geographically, identified by participant group (youth, educator, and community member/parent)

and grouped by themes in a searchable website, which we call the Maine School Stories Portal. The Portal features summaries of each theme and subtheme, with embedded participant quotes. This level of transparency will, we hope, contribute to greater trust in the findings and usefulness of the resulting implications as we understand them.

Data Collection

Data collection took place between January 2022 and March 2026, drawing participants from all 16 of Maine's counties through statewide community organization networks, local nonprofits, schools, and libraries. Three groups participated: students ages 13 and older (which in practice meant primarily high school students), educators (including classroom teachers, administrators, and building staff working directly with students), and community members (inclusive of parents). To reduce potential conflicts of interest or bias, we did not recruit colleagues, friends, or family. Conversations lasted approximately 75 to 90 minutes and were held in-person and on Zoom, typically in groups of two to eight participants. All participants received a full introduction to the project and consent language before conversations began and were free to leave at any point; minors' parents were given the opportunity to opt out on their child's behalf. All conversations were recorded and uploaded to the Cortico platform, and participants were given contact information to request redactions, with which we promptly complied. The atmosphere we sought to create was comfortable and grounded rather than formal and academic.

Below is a table showing the number of participants from each county, by participant type, with totals per county and per participant type indicated. (Note that conversations held with industry professionals were excluded from the analysis done for this report and therefore are not included in the table.) Further detail on recruitment and data collection procedures is provided in the appendix, including discussion of the proportionally high engagement levels in Aroostook and Kennebec counties.

Table 1: Participants in Maine Education 2050 conversations by county and by participant group.

County	Community	Educator	Youth	Total
Androscoggin	7	5	19	31
Aroostook	68	91	81	240
Cumberland	63	38	27	128
Lincoln	8	9	6	23
Franklin	5	9	6	20
Hancock	5	7	6	18
Washington	9	16	7	32
Knox	7	4	6	17
Somerset	6	12	9	27
York	11	8	38	57
Kennebec	71	44	27	142
Waldo		6	12	18
Sagadahoc	5	3	4	12
Penobscot	54	50	49	153
Piscataquis	5	5	6	16
Oxford	4	5	6	15
Statewide	59	18	11	88
	387	330	320	**1,037**

Analysis

The analysis unfolded in three stages over approximately four years, from Fall 2022 through March 2026. In the first stage, we identified themes within each participant group using inductive coding methods, developing and refining descriptive codes across conversations as data collection progressed, and then applying those codes using deductive methods to new data. In the second stage, working with scientists at MIT's Center for Constructive Communication, we used an iterative AI-assisted process to identify cross-cutting conceptual themes across all three participant groups; subthemes with fewer than 100 associated statements or ones that did not hold as true cross-cutting themes as the dataset grew were removed. The third stage, February 2025 through March 2026, involved structural coding of all responses by question and assignment of each statement to one or more themes and subthemes. Validation strategies included team discussion of subtheme definitions, thorough review of associated statements, and written thematic memos. Finally, we employed Claude (an AI tool) to surface geographic and

cross-group patterns within a dataset of approximately 15,000 statements—an analysis that would have required an untenable investment of time without AI assistance. Our deep familiarity with the data at that point allowed us to evaluate the strength of suggested patterns. Further detail on the analysis process is provided in Appendix B.

Framing

Why "What Is Essential?" Matters Now

The question of what constitutes the essentials of an education has taken on renewed urgency in the twenty-first century. Rapid technological disruption, changing family structures, civic fragmentation, and economic uncertainty have converged to challenge long-standing assumptions about what schools should teach. As the Office for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Future of Education and Skills 2030/2040 project has found, education systems worldwide are grappling with how to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist, using technologies not yet invented, to solve problems not yet anticipated (OECD, 2019). Their Learning Compass is so named to showcase the need for students to have an education that prepares them to navigate uncertainty independently, not rely on following directions, which is so often at heart of current classroom experience.

> The future, by definition, is unpredictable; but by being attuned to some of the trends now sweeping across the world, we can learn – and help our children learn – to adapt to, thrive in and even shape whatever the future holds. Students need support in developing not only knowledge and skills but also attitudes and values that can guide them towards ethical and responsible actions. At the same time, they need opportunities to develop their creative ingenuity to help propel humanity towards a bright future. (OECD, 2019, pg. 5)

Within the context of an uncertain global future, the U.S. must also grapple with an aging system already well behind and too often no longer using evidence-based teaching and learning practices. Many terms have been used to describe an appropriate response: reform, transform, renew, renovate, redesign. Whichever term is used, national organizations are clear that change is non-negotiable; *how* we change is up to us. The School Superintendents Association's Learning 2025 Commission argues that "investing in the futures of America's K-12 students will determine the future of our communities, our civil society, our economy, and our democracy" (AASA, n.d., pg. 5). They argue for "nothing less than a 'holistic redesign of our schools,' premised on the beliefs that:"

- Systemic redesign must happen within an intentional, relationships-based culture that is whole learner-focused, in which no learners are marginalized, and schools are future-driven;
- Learning must entirely reorient around the learner to support their social, emotional, and cognitive growth; and

- School, association, state, and federal education leaders must collectively unlock resources that tap into learning accelerators, connect schools with community-based supports and services, ensure high-quality early learning for all children, and diversify the educator pipeline. (AASA, n.d., pg. 8)

Their "Future Ready Framework" has drawn districts from around the country to commit to transforming public education using their recommendations toward schools that prepare students "to work, serve, and contribute meaningfully to their community and country."

Maine in particular faces these realities within a distinctive educational context. Governor Janet Mills' commitment to funding public schooling for the first time at the level required by statute (55% of the total cost of education statewide), legislation she signed to gradually increase starting teacher pay from a $40,000 to $50,000; and recently making community college permanently free to Maine students provides a stable foundation on which to build. Likewise, in 2018, Commissioner Pender Makin shifted the Maine Department of Education toward a whole-child approach and investment in innovation, recognizing that traditional schooling models were no longer serving too many Maine students. For example, Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) supported educators to learn design thinking approaches to solving classroom-level challenges and made grants to 42 pilot districts implementing innovative practices such as outdoor or community learning opportunities (MDOE, n.d.). Recent investments such as these acknowledge the need for what, at least, could be called a "renovation" of our education system.

As a predominantly rural state with an aging and naturally declining population (Office of the State Economist, 2023) and an economy in transition, Maine must prepare students not only for global workforce demands but also for the particulars of life in our state—and our particular set of challenges. A confluence of factors provides unique opportunities and challenges. For example, in terms of opportunities, families working in heritage industries such as fishing and farming for generations are now seeing their children compelled to consider alternatives, with some responding by bringing an entrepreneurial twist to the family business; agritourism on the family farm is one example of this phenomenon. Entrepreneurship programs have sprouted up across the state to support Mainers to start, transform, and grow businesses, providing a rich ecosystem of supports for those so inclined within a culture already committed to supporting small local businesses.

Yet, many of Maine's local communities have felt a devastating decrease in family stability, which has affected in the shorter term what communities and their schools are feeling called to provide for local children. A longer-term concern is impact on the workforce. For example, research from the Brookings Institution has documented how the opioid crisis has particularly affected rural communities, with negative spillover effects on children's educational outcomes in hard-hit areas (Darolia & Tyler, 2022; Drescher et al., 2022). Schools in these communities are increasingly asked to address student needs that extend well beyond traditional academics, from providing mental health support to serving as de facto community centers for families under stress. For example, the John T. Gorman Foundation reports that in Knox County

"families identified many barriers to advancing the physical, mental, and social-emotional development of their children. For one, parents reported that needed services were unavailable or too far away. Parents had trouble accessing high-quality childcare where their children could gain valuable learning and developmental experiences. Moreover, parents themselves were feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and unsupported" (John T. Gorman Foundation, 2025). Recent MEPRI research has highlighted the increased prevalence of negative and sometimes dangerous behavior of Maine students and the impact on classrooms (Scheibel et al., 2025). In summary, Maine schools are facing extraordinary challenges to meeting even the status quo expectations, which has downstream effects on wellbeing and community and workforce strength.

While our schooling system was largely designed during and following a time of deep international and local instability, the industrial revolution through the post-WWII boom, our needs from education were much different then. And while industrialization was considered "rapid," the second industrial revolution, also called the technological revolution, has already led to immense changes in our daily lives, with the change cycle tightening at a dizzying pace. Jobs that existed yesterday, may not exist tomorrow, or may be substantially changed. We are now in another period of instability, which calls for investigation into how schooling itself needs to evolve to serve children and communities with a greater depth and breadth of immediate needs as well as prepare students for a life nearly guaranteed to be continuously and rapidly changing in ways we cannot predict.

Frameworks that Define Educational Essentials

Here we offer four frameworks, one international, one national/non-US-based, one national/US-based, and one state-level, that attempt to define the "essentials" of what a student should know and be able to do upon graduation.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

The OECD's Learning Compass 2030 (OECD, 2019) offers a framework particularly relevant to this study in its future orientation and the participatory nature of its design. It also holds that, "[i]ndividual well-being helps build economic, human, social and natural capital – which, in turn, enhances individual well-being over time" (p. 26)—making knowledge to sustain wellbeing an essential. It also identifies student agency—the capacity to navigate independently through unfamiliar contexts—as central to educational purpose, and distinguishes cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, social and emotional skills, practical and physical skills as essential in combination. While it does not prescribe what ethics and values a student should hold, it does indicate that developing personal ethics and values are a critical aspect of education. All of these are increasingly recognized as essential for thriving in the 21st century and as important facets of human intelligence. The framework explicitly acknowledges that as AI changes labor market demands, people need to rely more on uniquely human capacities that complement rather than compete with technological capabilities.

Finland's Basic Education 2045: For Life

Likewise, Finland's recently revised vision for its comprehensive education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2026), was created in consultation with over 5,000 children, young people, and adults. It notes that "[t]he challenges and crises we face cannot be solved by technological innovation alone, but require strong human development" (pg. 16). Similarly future-oriented, the Finnish vision "looks ahead to 2045 – a future built on the transformative power of education. Instead of adapting schools to projected futures forecast today, the purpose of the vision is to serve as a compass pointing towards a desirable future" (pg. 16). At its core: "school is for life: for a meaningful life, life together, and life on the planet...The most profound transformation envisioned for the future of basic education is to continue the learning journey from individual knowledge and skills towards shared agency and the co-creation of a meaningful life together" (pg. 8).

The vision is neither focused on efficiency nor on immediate practicality. It posits that some crucial learning experiences may not be "practical" outside furthering human development, which it values in and of itself, but also, secondarily, contributing to a thriving society. The will to use one's talents and interests for the common good is a core value in the 2045 vision. Teachers' wellbeing is centralized alongside student wellbeing, and school campuses are reimagined as belonging to and serving the full community surrounding the school.

While the framework itself cannot be fully described in this report, here we share one way the vision organizes the essentials of Finnish comprehensive education, which is meant for children up to age 16. Students next attend upper secondary school for two to four years, learning academics and the arts while pursuing their interests or attending vocational education.

"[T]he purpose of education in fostering human growth and a meaningful life can be summarized [sic] as a learning pathway that unfolds in the school. Along this pathway, students make five educational transitions during comprehensive school:"

- A pathway to learning and *sivistys*: strong general knowledge and thinking skills from basic skills to metacognitive skills
- A pathway to a life of meaning: identity, skills for meaningfulness and self-understanding
- A pathway to community: socio-emotional and ethical skills, and ways of cooperating and getting along with others
- A pathway to agency: agency skills for the common good; education as a force for action
- A pathway to the future: transformative skills, self-efficacy and a motivation for lifelong learning. (pg. 45).

Further, the new vision describes the context as being as important as content. "Teaching is diverse: the importance of emotion, movement, imagination, and culture for the development of skills and human growth is recognised in basic education" (pg. 40).

AASA, The School Superintendents Association's Learning 2025: Student-Centered, Future-Focused Education

Learning 2025 argues, "Across the country and across the political aisle, we largely all want the same things for America's children: The opportunity to receive an education that prepares them to contribute as productive members of society and find success in life on a path of their choosing" (AASA, n.d., pg. 4). Created with an advisory committee drawn from education, community, business, and philanthropy, including Maine School Superintendents Association's executive director, Eileen King, it describes "real skills for real life" as the centerpiece of the new essentials. To basic academics they add adaptability, interpersonal skills, social-emotional and self-management skills, and skills for living a healthy life. The framework acknowledges that No Child Left Behind ended up leaving behind some of what made our students in previous generations so successful, including "learning to learn." It advises schools to support teachers in developing high-quality relationships with students from which they can best understand how to teach them these skills. The framework also centers partnerships with families, communities, and businesses to define what is essential, how and where learning happens, and when and how specific resources can be leveraged to teach all students in ways that engage them.

The framework (AASA, 2023) is organized into five main principles:

- *Principle 1: Prioritize Student Centered Learning. We must ensure what is taught in school is fit-for-purpose and closely aligned with each student's individual needs and strengths.*
- *Principle 2: The New Basics: Real Skills for Real Life. In addition to academic skills, children need to learn how to think critically, solve problems, work well with others, develop resilience, and regulate their emotions. These skills are essential for preparing children for any path they choose in life and are in addition to—not in lieu of—traditional academic skills.*
- *Principle 3: Attract, Hire, Retain, and Reward the Best People. Talented, motivated, and highly effective educators are essential to student success. Investing in their growth, success, and support is one of the best investments every citizen can make in protecting America's future. To develop a deep bench of highly skilled and highly motivated educators in the talent pipeline, we must re-examine the current staffing models and teaching environments that no longer work for the community or the school.*
- *Principle 4: Build Highly Engaged Family, Community, and Business Partnerships. Students succeed when families, schools, businesses, and philanthropic and community leaders work together as an engaged*

alliance. When communities are active partners, they function as an expansion of the classroom, and students have the opportunity to road-test their newfound skills and build confidence through exposure to new experiences. This is essential to improving student achievement, as well as for strengthening the overall community that benefits from student, family, and school engagement.

- *Principle 5: Measure What Matters. A highly successful K-12 education should produce more than just straight-A students—it should produce productive and engaged citizens who can advance America's future. Using a variety of relevant measures provides a more comprehensive picture of a student's abilities and readiness for work and life.*

Maine's Guiding Principles and Maine Learning Results

Maine's own Guiding Principles, initially adopted in 1997, describe cross-curricular standards aligned with these broader trends: clear and effective communication, self-directed and lifelong learning, creative and practical problem solving, responsible and involved citizenship, and integrative thinking. Within those principles, "The Maine Department of Education Regulation 132 - The Maine Learning Results: Parameters for Essential Instruction establishes parameters for essential teaching and learning in grades Pre-Kindergarten through Diploma across eight content areas and supports the goals outlined in the Guiding Principles….These learning goals identify the knowledge and skills required for college, career and citizenship in the 21st century" (MDOE, 2026). The full set of Maine Learning Results is too extensive to include here.

Evidence on an Expanded Set of Educational Essentials

Research consistently demonstrates that the skills employers identify as most important for workforce success extend well beyond technical or academic knowledge. While cognitive skills remain important, their relative importance has declined since 2000, while emphasis on social skills have increased as routine cognitive tasks become increasingly automated (Deming, 2017). An analysis of tens of millions of job postings found that seven of the ten most-requested skills were durable skills, with communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership topping employer lists and requested far more frequently than technical skills (America Succeeds & Lightcast, 2021); a 2025 update confirmed the trend has grown stronger, with 76% of all job postings now requiring at least one durable skill (America Succeeds & Lightcast, 2025).

The evidence base for social-emotional learning is equally strong. A comprehensive meta-analysis of 424 studies involving over 575,000 students across 53 countries confirmed that SEL programs improve academic achievement and meaningfully enhance students' social and emotional skills, behaviors, relationships, and school functioning (Cipriano et al., 2023), while study quality varied and outcomes will depend significantly on program design and implementation quality. Earlier foundational research found that SEL participation produced

academic performance gains equivalent to an 11-percentile-point improvement (Durlak et al., 2011), with a subsequent meta-analysis of follow-up studies confirming that those gains persisted — including an equivalent 11-percentile-point academic achievement gain measured months to years after interventions ended (Taylor et al., 2017). The Learning Policy Institute's review of 12 independent meta-analyses found consistent positive effects across programs and contexts, concluding that SEL benefits students at all grade levels from pre-K through 12th grade (Greenberg, 2023). A benefit-cost analysis of six SEL programs found that anticipated benefits exceeded costs in every case, with an average return of eleven dollars for every dollar invested (Belfield et al., 2015).

Research from neuroscience and developmental science grounds whole-child approaches: human relationships catalyze healthy development and learning, adversity affects learning, and children actively construct knowledge based on experience and social contexts (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). For students affected by family disruption, trauma, substance use disorder, or community instability, whole-child approaches may be necessary rather than merely beneficial.

Proponents of a “back to basics” approach, however, may point to data from NAEP that show declining performance in core academic areas even prior to the pandemic (National Assessment Governing Board, 2025) and a 2024 federal assessment found that one in four young adults ages 16 to 24 reads at the lowest literacy levels—and more than half of those individuals hold high school diplomas, raising serious questions about the relationship between credential attainment and actual skill acquisition (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The argument that schools should focus on what they do best, academic instruction, rather than expanding into domains traditionally reserved for families and communities is important to consider. This concern is particularly relevant in resource-constrained environments like Maine. However, the evidence on SEL and durable skills does not suggest these should *replace* academic learning; rather, research supports their *integration* as enablers of higher levels of academic achievement.

The Slow Pace of Educational Change

Within that context of rapid societal, technological, and workforce changes, schools have tended to respond slowly. Educational institutions are remarkably resistant to fundamental transformation, even as they accommodate incremental modifications over time. In their seminal work *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, Tyack and Cuban (1995) documented what they termed the "grammar of schooling,” the organizational regularities that structure how schools divide time and space, classify students, and allocate grades, as remarkably persistent across decades of reform efforts. Schooling in general looks substantively similar in 2026 to that provided over 30 years ago.

A review of the educational change literature confirms that developing school climates conducive to serious renewal efforts is demanding work, with many reform programs failing to last or producing only superficial change as teachers revert to prior practices (McLure &

Aldridge, 2023). And effective *systemic* reform requires sustained capacity building over time to enable the necessary shifts in beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and structures; most efforts fail, not because they are poorly conceived but because they underestimate the complexity and duration of meaningful change processes (Fullan, 2016). This temporal mismatch argues for beginning serious conversations about educational transformation well in advance of when changes are needed.

In 2026, given the rapid social, technological, and economic changes, the time for action has already arrived.

AI and the Case for Flexibility

The emergence and increasingly rapid evolution of artificial intelligence sharpens the argument for urgency in rethinking educational essentials. The World Economic Forum projects that AI and information processing technologies will transform 86% of businesses by 2030; accounting for job creation and displacement across all sectors, the net result is an estimated 78 million new jobs globally, but only for workers who possess the skills those new roles require (WEF, 2025). Brookings Institution analysis found that generative AI excels at tasks previously considered uniquely human, including writing, analysis, creativity, and persuasion, changing the calculus for which human capacities schools should cultivate (Muro et al., 2024). Since then, AI has become deeply integrated in academic processes: by late 2025, 62% of students from middle school through college reported using AI for homework, up from 48% just seven months earlier, and 54% of teens reported using it specifically to get help with schoolwork (Doss et al., 2026; Pew Research Center, 2026). The International Monetary Fund concludes that students need cognitive, creative, and technical skills that complement AI rather than compete with it (Jaumotte et al., 2026).

If we cannot predict which specific skills and knowledge will be most valuable in coming decades, then developing general capacities—adaptability, learning agility, social-emotional skills, and problem-solving—may prove more critical, and resilient, than any fixed content, and becomes, in itself, an argument for the essentials Maine people have identified through this study.

Major Findings from this Study

Across more than 200 focus group conversations we conducted with over 1,000 Mainers to inform this study over a period of four years, we consistently heard several common themes from students, educators, and community members as they described the kinds of learning experiences, mindsets, and skill development they feel are “essential” for helping youth develop and prepare for healthy and successful lives as adults.

First, participants spoke passionately about the positive things already happening in their schools and communities to support student learning and growth. However, they also

emphasized that changes are needed for their personal and community aspirations to be met. Participants articulated the specific ways they would like to see Maine's education system break from the constraints of rigid structures and practices and "one-size-fits-all" approaches to teaching and learning that have marked public education in the US for over a century. In short, participants describe a desire to renew and evolve Maine's educational system to provide a flexible, personally relevant, and community-engaged model of schooling they believe is needed for Maine and all Mainers to flourish.

Content Matters

While most high school students and adult participants still value the core academic subjects of mathematics, English language literacy, science, social studies and history typically taught in public schools and see a need for students to learn at least the foundational levels of content in these subjects, they stressed that other kinds of knowledge, skills, and mindsets are essential for students to have success in their personal lives, higher education, and careers. Participants consistently said the new essentials need to include what they called "practical life skills" ranging from cooking to communication and collaboration, emailing to empathy, and time management to tax filing. Mindsets for self-directed lifelong learning, effective civic engagement in support of the common good, and successful participation in a rapidly changing employment landscape were also identified as essential. Further, participants pointed out the importance of helping students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills both in academic subject areas and in practice throughout their everyday lives. We heard a clear call for an expanded set of essentials beyond what we've previously known as "the basics."

Context Matters

These expanded essentials, however, can't simply be crammed into current courses and classroom settings. Participants shared an urgent need for more flexibility in how and where students learn and are taught. Both students and adult participants described how traditional curricula and instructional practices are failing to engage too many students and thus a need has emerged for more relevant, active, hands-on learning approaches that allow for deeper exploration of students' individual interests and passions. Likewise, the benefits of learning opportunities outside of school were highlighted, such as those provided by school jobs, volunteering, sports, independent projects, faith community activities, and family life. Organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, the YMCA, local recreation centers, and nonprofits were often mentioned as providers of some of the "new essentials," and many participants wondered how schools and community organizations could coordinate more closely to ensure all students had the experiences to develop essential mindsets and skills. Finally, most students expressed a clear preference for learning in intellectually stimulating, discussion-based or activity-based environments where they were treated with respect, enabled to participate actively, and motivated to learn by the relevance of the subject matter to their current interests, not only what might be "relevant" years later in their adult lives.

Timely Opportunities Matter

Students shared a strong desire for the flexibility to explore a greater variety of topics and subjects earlier in their school careers as well as more opportunities to go deeper into areas of their own interest in high school. Students also asked for earlier exposure to more diverse career pathways, from those available directly out of high school to others requiring advanced degrees, through even brief experiential learning opportunities. Career and technical education (CTE) continues to be in high demand by high school students across the state, with some arguing that CTE should be available starting in middle school; yet, these students are often constrained by schedule conflicts, misalignment between their CTE program and high school graduation requirements, and both limited seats in desirable tracks and limited local program offerings. Similarly, some students pursuing a college degree have found their high schools don't have the resources to offer the advanced courses they need, which drove some to online courses not all felt provided the learning environment or outcomes they desired.

Preview of the Following Sections

In the sections that follow, we present the common themes we found across participants and places, organized into three broad categories describing the *what*, the *how*, and the *where*. We first describe the specific skills or kinds of learning participants deem to be "essential" for youth development and healthy communities, and then describe how participants feel we can best support that kind of learning or skill development both within schools and outside of the schools through curricular and instructional shifts. Finally, we describe the broader structural and policy changes that participants said are needed to allow for greater flexibility to meet the different learning needs and career paths for students in Maine.

The WHAT

Practical Life Skills

The general theme of "practical skills" describes what participants said they felt was essential more than any other thing mentioned. When participants said "practical skills," they generally meant skills used to live adult life, and by "practical" they meant frequently used skills. Adults and high school students note that many of the non-academic practical skills they desire had once been taught in schools in previous decades but have since gone by the wayside, replaced by more and more academic content standards. Both student and adult participants said that higher-level academic classes in specific disciplines should be available but not displace time spent mastering the essentials for creating and sustaining a healthy, stable, and meaningful adult life. Participants described school as having evolved to focus too tightly on too many discrete academic standards at all grade levels, leading to a paucity of opportunities to develop the core competencies of adult life.

Everyday skills students deemed necessary for adult life, which we call skills for "adulting," include capacities related to taking care of themselves, such as knowing how to do things like cook, do laundry, sew or mend clothing, make a personal budget and manage money, pay taxes, maintain a vehicle, and take care of their physical, emotional, mental, sexual, and reproductive health. SEL skills were noted to be highly desirable and practical and included the ability to interact and communicate appropriately in various settings, work cooperatively, regulate emotions, take different viewpoints, and manage conflict. Psychological skills and mindsets mentioned included being able to cope with struggles to accomplish tasks and having perseverance, effective problem-solving strategies, and critical thinking skills.

Participants described needing practical skills for success in any workplace as including understanding the importance of attendance and timeliness and how to apply for a job, prepare a resume, and engage in a job interview. Skills for engaging effectively in civic life were described as practical and included empathy, communication, and problem solving, while practical knowledge included voting practicalities and understanding how election systems work as well as some history relevant to current events. History was notable for being less valued by youth participants overall than by adults.

We have sorted the practical skills thought to be essential by participants into six general categories, described below: Practical Literacies, Durable Human Skills, Healthy and Self-Sufficient Adult Life, Citizenship, and Diverse Career Preparation.

Practical Literacies

We have grouped English language literacy, mathematics and numeracy, financial literacy, and tech and digital literacy together as skills for navigating and making sense of the world. UNESCO defines literacy in this way:

> Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills. (UNESCO, March 2026)

Participants show strong consensus around the idea that schools should include both basic and advanced skills in reading, writing, and mathematics as well as other subjects in the curriculum.

Numeracy and Mathematics

Despite the recent focus in the media on the "reading wars," educators and students spoke more often about mathematics than English language literacy. Generally, discussion about

mathematics concerns the need to have various levels of courses available. Participants generally agree that all students need basic math skills in arithmetic, number sense, mental math, and measurement for everyday life. However, they also note that some students will need more advanced math classes to prepare for college and career choices. This idea specifically seems to apply to students pursuing healthcare careers such as medicine and nursing, of which there were a relatively high percent within our participant pool. Some participants suggest that graduation expectations for math courses need not be uniform but should be tailored more to students' chosen pathways.

The impact of rigid school schedules on mathematics learning was described by students and educators. We heard students voice frustration about the difficulty of scheduling the number of math courses they need to be competitive for college applications, feeling at a disadvantage if they don't have algebra in eighth grade, and sometimes needing to take math courses online to obtain what they need. Some educators express frustration with the rigid time schedule for math instruction, which limits their ability to help struggling students. Students and educators call for more active, hands-on learning in math as opposed to worksheet-based instruction to increase student engagement and support different ways students learn, citing examples such as measurement activities, cooking, and math games in elementary school.

English Language Literacy

Somewhat surprisingly, comments regarding reading and writing are more general in nature and do not often specify the types of skills participants feel that students need. Participants seem to take it for granted that reading and writing will be taught in school. Participants note that all students need to learn to read and write at a basic level to function in life and in careers, including writing in the specific form of an email. What that basic level is, exactly, is not clearly articulated. However, there is debate about the need for all high school students, regardless of their career path, to study literature in particular; certainly not all students said it is necessary and many adults seemed to agree. Educators are less sure that this is the case, considering the value beyond careers that reading and discussing literature can have.

Educators acknowledge that some students struggle to reach that basic level of reading and writing skills, for a variety of reasons. One reason commonly given is that parents and children do not read together at home, as was typical in the past. Some teachers describe not being able to expect any reading at all to be happening at home, which impacts the progress they are able to make with early readers in particular. Elementary school teachers lament the loss of "unit" studies, in which students would read fiction and non-fiction on the theme of the major subject of study for that month, which they said built cohesive learning experience and more of a feeling of the relevance of reading.

Some participants believe students should be reading more books in school, while we heard a number of educators describe different ways their schools are supporting literacy skills using technology. A smaller subset of participants shared a desire for students to learn

handwriting skills again for a variety of reasons, including healthy brain development, while none said they thought it was unimportant.

Financial Literacy

Financial literacy is identified as an essential by students and adults alike. Participants strongly agree that schools should include direct and thorough instruction to develop financial literacy in all students to prepare them for adult life after high school. While participants feel that *some* students may gain *some* financial literacy from parents, most participants agree students are not generally receiving the preparation they need to be able to handle their own finances independently after high school.

Students in some places indicate that their school has a course that includes skills leading to financial literacy. However, few feel these courses were enough, with some students describing a few related topics being embedded in brief form into other courses and others saying that even a full semester course in one year is not enough, especially when material is not taught experientially. Participants identify general topics such as basic budgeting, how to pay for things, money management, saving money, avoiding debt, and building good credit. Participants also describe other areas where students need to develop financial literacy skills, such as how to apply for a college scholarship; obtaining credit or a loan to buy a car or home; understanding taxes and understanding different kinds of insurance.

Technological and Digital Literacy

We define technological and digital literacy here as the ability to use, navigate, understand the role of, and critique technology and digital tools. Fewer participants spoke about the need for students to develop tech and digital literacy skills in school compared with those who emphasized the need for financial literacy to be developed at school. Of those who did discuss it being an educational essential, educator groups and some parents were the most vocal. However, community members and parents often describe the challenges young people, and those who care about them, face in managing life in an increasingly online world. In that context, educators emphasize that students need support to develop the critical thinking skills that enable them to evaluate sources and the reliability of information and the self-awareness and self-management to effectively manage their technology use. The advent of ubiquitous AI tools is causing critical thinking in particular to become a core digital literacy skill. Some adults also note how technology and AI skills in particular are now required in more jobs, and, in schools, there has been a noticeable shift with many students using AI tools to complete tasks and school assignments. Educators would like students to learn that technology is a tool that can make tasks easier or support learning but that critical thinking is required for effective use of that technology without compromising other core skills and capabilities.

Durable Human Skills

Non-technical competencies essential for workforce and civic success, variously called soft skills, success skills, social-emotional skills, or durable skills, share a common core: critical

thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and character (SREB, 2023; America Succeeds, 2024). This report uses the term *durable human skills* to emphasize both their enduring relevance across careers and contexts and their resistance to automation—the distinctly human capacities that AI cannot readily replicate. This subtheme was more than twice as strong as the others within the larger theme of "practical life skills," clearly indicating that Mainers of all ages across the state see durable human skills as absolutely essential for success. Participants particularly emphasize the importance of empathy, collaboration, and critical thinking. Within the broader category of durable human skills, our data surfaced two distinct clusters: social-emotional learning (SEL) skills and critical thinking.

SEL can be defined in many different ways, and participants in the study sometimes referred to "SEL" broadly and non-specifically. In our analysis we used CASEL's (2020) SEL framework, which has five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. There is overlap among the competencies and they are designed to be considered holistically. For example, critical thinking, which we have described separately, is in fact included in CASEL's SEL framework under "responsible decision making," yet participants discussed critical thinking often enough, and with enough emphasis, that we chose to highlight it separately.

However, we do not want the separation of these skills to dilute their singular importance to Mainers in this study. It would be correct to say that participants of all types across Maine described SEL as the single most important category of practical skills people need to live healthy, stable, meaningful adult lives. In fact, many of the skills within our other subthemes, including Citizenship and Healthy and Self-Sufficient Living, as well as the "practical academics," rely on a foundation of SEL skills.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Across students, teachers, parents, and community members, SEL is widely understood as foundational to students' long-term well-being, learning, and success in a rapidly changing social and economic context. SEL is thought of less as a discrete course of learning or program and more as a set of core human capacities—self-regulation, empathy, sharing one's voice and listening openly, responsibility, persistence, adaptability, and ethical judgment—that enable people to function in relationships, workplaces, and communities. Some participants focused on specific skills such as compromise, negotiation, and standing up for oneself or the need for empathy and teamwork, which were echoed across roles and ages.

Many participants argue that these skills are at least as important as academic content, particularly in the early years and middle grades, and that they are best developed through lived experiences: play, arts, collaboration, conflict, failure, routines, and real-world engagement rather than rote instruction. There is broad concern that modern conditions—especially technology use, early academic pressure, reduced unstructured time, and fewer opportunities for in-person socialization—are undermining the development of these skills, increasing anxiety, reactivity, and disengagement among students.

A second cross-cutting theme is that SEL is inseparable from belonging, purpose, and identity formation. Participants across groups emphasize that students need safe environments to explore emotions, define values and goals, reflect on setbacks, and to learn how to use their voice responsibly while remaining in relationship with others. SEL is closely linked by parents and community members to executive function, resilience, and self-determination: managing time, coping with discomfort, asking for help, handling criticism, persisting through difficulty, and balancing personal needs with collective responsibility. Many see early childhood education, recess, arts, extracurriculars, and community-based experiences as especially powerful sites for this kind of learning. While schools are viewed as a central venue for SEL because "that's where the kids are," most participants also stress that SEL cannot be fully accomplished by schools alone and requires reinforcement by families, communities, and broader social norms modeled by adults.

Next we describe how the three different participant groups framed SEL and understood it to be an essential element of a comprehensive education.

Educators view SEL as the practical gateway to learning and classroom functioning — the "life skills" that enable collaboration, persistence, emotional regulation, and academic engagement. They emphasize the need for unstructured time, play, flexible curricula, and teacher autonomy to weave SEL into daily practice, particularly in early grades, and express frustration that standardization, testing pressures, and mandated curricula crowd out these opportunities. Educators are acutely aware of rising student anxiety, dysregulation, and sensitivity, and see explicit instruction in coping strategies, communication, empathy, and responsibility as necessary. One educator expressed what we heard from many: "Students, they do what they can to avoid any sort of difficult conversation, be it in leadership roles or whatever…" They also noted that making SEL a core component of teaching is emotionally demanding work requiring professional development, staffing support, and attention to teachers' own well-being—and that inconsistent adult modeling in society undermines SEL instruction in schools.

Students describe SEL most concretely through the skills they feel they lack and the stress they experience without them. They consistently identify empathy, self-confidence, time management, motivation, patience, determination, and asking for help as essential but insufficiently taught. Many report difficulty talking with others, managing overwhelming feelings, and balancing present demands with future expectations, connecting poor SEL skills to anxiety, low self-image, and disengagement. Students describe their most meaningful opportunities to practice SEL coming through sports, clubs, recess, and social time—spaces where failure, risk-taking, and recovery may feel safe. Compared with adults, students are more focused on practical guidance, adult modeling, and learning environments that are emotionally safe, free from bullying, and rich in real human interaction. One student captured a sentiment we heard widely: "Biggest skill? Getting along with other people because I know me and a lot of the other people do not have that skill whatsoever. And when you're in a job, you need that."

Parents and community members tend to frame SEL in moral, civic, and life-preparedness terms, emphasizing character traits such as integrity, kindness, accountability, compassion, and respect, and connecting SEL directly to happiness, workforce readiness, and social cohesion. Many argue for prioritizing SEL—especially in early childhood, PK–K, and middle school—over early academics, with some citing research, developmental appropriateness, and concerns about anxiety and burnout. Parents are particularly worried about the effects of technology, instant gratification, and reduced face-to-face interaction on children's social development, and often stress the importance of discipline, routines, and high expectations alongside emotional awareness. While many see SEL as a shared responsibility between home and school, they also acknowledge that too many children lack sufficient support outside school, making school-based SEL essential.

Critical Thinking Skills

Participants' statements that we labeled as "critical thinking" did not always use the term explicitly. Participants would sometimes describe, for example, aspects of critical thinking such as synthesis of information or the construction of arguments. However, all participant groups agreed that being able to think critically is essential, not only for completing academic tasks in school, but to support reasoning and problem solving in everyday life. Critical thinking is also connected to good communication and engaging effectively in civil discourse as well as evaluating the sometimes-overwhelming amount of information available, which overlaps with AI, digital, and media literacy skills. An Aroostook County educator said, "My kids have no idea. So they see something online and they're like, 'Oh my God, this is real.' And I'm like, 'No, it's not.' Hashtag fake news. But they have no idea. They don't have those skills."

Many adults also shared concerns that students seem to rely on others to make decisions for them or minimally engage with information before arriving at conclusions; some would like students to be able to critique their own education and the information they receive at school. One educator said,

> *I think when I came into teaching a long time ago, it was about the teacher with the knowledge, and I put that knowledge into your head. And kids didn't really have to think. We just had to memorize, and I was very good it at that, so I did well in school…I want my students now, today, to come out of school thinking, being critical thinkers, being able to have their own ideas, not my ideas...*

A student from York County shared, "And like hearing stuff from a teacher and then just applying it is only going to take you so far. So it's about like shaping yourself as a person and starting those, like developing your own ideas." Her classmate said, "One thing that has been really helpful in improving my critical thinking is like the I.B. [International Baccalaureate]. I've been taking I.B. English and the I.B. approach to and kind of how it teaches you ways to think rather than teaches you what you kind of should know, as I've found in, like, AP classes."

Citizenship Skills

Participants spoke more about civic responsibility than financial literacy and even English language literacy and numeracy within the larger theme of practical life skills. Many skills participants describe as necessary for effective citizenship do overlap with skills we describe as durable human skills. Participants across generations and roles emphasize the need for education to go beyond academics as Mainers highly prize skills that enable people to work together to identify and solve problems in the community. We heard across the state that building responsible citizens starts with real-world experiences that foster empathy, ongoing community engagement, and practical understanding of society.

Both students and adult participants spoke often about the value of students engaging in volunteer efforts to help their local communities, either on their own or through school projects and partnerships. In fact, youth identify community service and engagement as the setting where they most often feel they matter. Participants feel this kind of engagement both helps address real needs in the community and also benefits students by developing their sense of empathy and also empowering students to feel they are accomplishing something meaningful and valued. Some participants talked about how students need to learn more about civics and government and be ready as adults to be engaged, responsible citizens in society and the world. Students express some interest in the idea that they could vote as adults, but recognize that they would need to make some effort to learn more before they could thoughtfully share their views and vote on issues or candidates. Youth and adult participants spoke of the challenges facing small communities, Maine, and the world, all requiring citizens to engage in discussion and make decisions together for a better future.

Adult participants share a concern that in addition to adults *not* providing good role models, schooling has also moved away from preparing youth for engaged citizenship, as a community member expresses:

> *I worry about, over the last few decades, the increasing focus on knowledge meeting the learning results in Maine, whenever those first came out. And perhaps fewer opportunities for students to engage in democratic consensus building activities, taking risks to be part of that, or to be a leader in that. And I worry about if youth don't have that experience during their school life, how are they going to be effective collaborative consensus building community members in the future, whether they're in a leadership role or not.*

As another community member explains, education should be "teaching kids about life and life skills and how to function in society." Similarly, a third community member argues that one of the most important lessons a student learns is to "understand their role in society and how to be a good and responsible citizen. So that they know the expectations that are on them for being a citizen when they graduate."

Healthy and Self-Sufficient Living

We have divided this larger theme into healthy living skills, which encompass all aspects of maintaining a healthy mind and body, and skills for what some called “adulting,” or carrying out the everyday tasks of an independent adult.

Healthy Living Skills

Participants across Maine want young people to understand how to create healthy and self-sufficient adult lives. Healthy living skills are seen as essential for thriving, encompassing everything from basic self-care and nutrition to resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. The need for comprehensive health education is stressed along with early, stigma-free instruction on essential topics. Specifically, an understanding of sexual health and substance use prevention were seen as critical topics. Students and adults both discussed elements of healthy lifestyles such as self-love and self-knowledge, work-life balance, building a strong support system, perseverance and managing stress. Many participants stress that these are *practical* skills, ranging from, as one student states, "being able to feed yourself" to what one educator describes as "basic skills of self-confidence and independence."

Nutrition and self-care are seen as especially important for many participants. One community member explains the need for

> *more healthy living experiences. We don't teach them how to cook anymore. We're in the land of eating processed quick food, and I think that's having a real detrimental impact on our youth’s bodies that we can see that across the country. So I think they need that along with some more of those healthy living exercises. What do you do for fun that's moving your body and taking care of yourself more?*

Despite the near universal agreement that young people need to gain the appropriate skills necessary for living a healthy adulthood, school itself and expectations for postsecondary preparation do not always support a healthy adolescence. Students trying to meet competing demands of school, work, sports, and family commitments, describe often ending up feeling overwhelmed and exhausted. In that context, social and family life, rest and sleep can suffer. Youth named what they are actually experiencing right now: sleep deprivation, bad school food, stigma around mental and sexual health topics, and the daily effort of managing mental health challenges while still showing up and pursuing their goals. Students also described the challenges of balancing time for school, sports, homework, jobs, and family time. “I feel like that's my whole, like, actual week and my weekends. I'm forced to work because I can't work during school…And so after that, I don't get to see my family very much." There was broad agreement among youth that when teachers assign homework, they need to consider all of the life expectations adults have for students after school. Students also believe being taught explicitly how to manage their time is crucial for their success. While adults often worried about students feeling disconnected, youth confirmed that social disconnection is a problem but added that they also feel over-scheduled and under-rested.

Adulting Skills

Survival skills such as cooking, basic home and auto repairs, and financial literacy are widely seen as essential for self-sufficient, successful adult life, yet many participants feel these skills are absent in today's education. In fact, survival skills were as important, if not more important, to participants across all groups as technological skills, for example. As one student said, "definitely like the practical skills. It's easier and less costly if you know how to cook from scratch, from the basics, that's something important…Just the common things in a house, like being able to clean, being able to cook, those things are going to help you a lot, even though they seem like little stuff."

Participants across the state emphasize the importance of embedding survival skills into education in order to prepare students to thrive in real-world situations, regardless of their future paths. Students often describe what they thought were the daily living expectations for adults as feeling very far from their current skill sets. Participants across locations have concern that not all youth learn these skills, whether the lack is due to parents not including young people in running the household or a lack of positive parental role models. There is strong agreement that school and the greater community have a responsibility to ensure that all young people are given the chance to learn from adults how to take care of themselves. The need is especially acute for students without strong family support at home, as one community member notes, "I don't think that we should necessarily rely on families to be able to teach skills that they might not even have, whether that's social skills or safety skills or any of that." Collectively, these perspectives underline a commitment to equipping students with the skills necessary for a healthy, balanced life, reinforcing the role of schools in nurturing students as whole people.

Time management stands out as a crucial life skill that students must develop to succeed in both academic and professional settings. We include it here because many Maine schools have experimented with or adopted proficiency-based systems that include flexible due dates for individual students, which has generated heated debate among students, parents, and educators. Participants repeatedly emphasize the importance of meeting deadlines, being punctual, and taking responsibility for one's commitments. As one educator put it, "Today's the test, and you've got to be on time and you've got to be ready for the test. You can't be giving them two or three days to take the test. It's life, it's purpose. If they can learn that at a young age, then good for them." This sentiment was echoed by others who noted that leniency around deadlines in schools can undermine accountability and leave students unprepared for the realities of college and the workforce, as one parent says, "The deadline is the deadline, and that's it…I think teachers have to make them accountable for their work." One student argues what we heard from many, "I think they should be more strict and everyone should be on the same page with due dates and redo's. I feel like that's a big thing where many students and teachers struggle with and we need to find a solution for it." In contrast, many students describe the challenges of school, sports, hours of homework, and work with family time. Others highlight the need for schools to provide more consistent yet realistic expectations, mirroring the actual demands of adult life.

Preparation for a Diversity of Careers

To better balance the needs and interests of students and society, participants call for building and expanding opportunities to help students prepare for a range of career pathways beyond high school. Most clearly, participants acknowledge that all adults need strong *basic* academic skills in reading, math, and beyond to function as adult citizens and carry out a range of work roles, whether so-called "white collar" or "blue collar." Some participants, including students, also voice the need to find creative ways to expand academic offerings and include higher level courses where they are limited, particularly in small, rural schools, while showing unequivocal support for college-going pathways through investment in more well-informed and available counselors. Yet there is a strong consensus that not all students will want or need a four-year bachelor's degree to pursue meaningful and necessary work roles as adults. Some participants describe how the push for everyone to attend college over the past few decades has led to too many students burdened with high college costs and severe workforce shortages in critical job sectors such as service, healthcare, and the trades. A few also note the need to support and celebrate military service as a post-secondary pathway.

One key element of this goal for preparation for a diversity of careers is supporting students' career awareness. Students often express a belief that they should hold a clear idea of their post-secondary plans by junior or senior year in high school. Because of this belief, high school students, and at times adults, voice dissatisfaction with the current practice in many schools of waiting until late in the high school years to discuss career options and post-secondary education or training. Participants of all ages stress that career awareness needs to start earlier, in the elementary and middle grades, to help students understand the range of choices available and what training is required for different careers.

A second element of meeting this goal is to provide applicable courses and career exploration experiences throughout the high school years. Participants cite the low numbers of guidance staff available to answer students' questions in some schools, and those school counselors' limited knowledge about careers and education requirements. Participants advocate for more field trips for students, their teachers, and guidance staff to visit different job sites in their communities and beyond, to learn more about the world of work. Similarly, students feel visiting college campuses or other educational settings earlier would be more helpful than the traditional college fair event that happens late in the high school years.

The HOW

Humanize School

A Maine PK-12 education is more than students gaining a specific knowledge base or demonstrating certain skills, according to participants across all groups. Many participants said that teaching style, pedagogical approaches, and classroom environment are equally important, whether to realize better academic outcomes for students; to enable students to lead healthy,

happy lives; or to foster the dispositions Maine needs in its citizens now and in the coming decades. Participants also took a step back and considered how teachers and schools might be better supported by districts and the state by making necessary changes at a systems level. This section therefore will describe the "how"—the manner in which teachers teach and the ways schools, districts, and the state can support teachers, and, therefore, students, to succeed.

Humanizing school could also be described as destandardizing. Participants have an overarching concern that schooling has become too rigid, too narrowly focused on quantitative measures of success, and ultimately, too unconcerned with the challenges, joys, hopes, and dreams of the human beings engaging in it, for both educators and students alike. School has become, we heard, standardized, even while we know there is no "standard" human being. Pressure to meet state standards and standardized testing requirements is negatively impacting the school experience for both students and teachers. Some educators advocate for "giving us that power back to teach and to enjoy and to laugh again." While many educators share their commitment to preparing students for a successful future by holding students to high expectations, there is also a call to simplify standards and look beyond standardized testing to adapt the system to better meet students' needs and teachers' needs too.

The overriding message from participants is this: Humanize school. Participants said teaching and learning should be

- relationships-first,
- respectful of students' voices,
- relevant to students *now,*
- responsive to the emerging future, and
- right for educators.

Standardized Testing

Participants who spoke about standardization consistently express frustration and share that too much focus on standardized testing has displaced meaningful teaching and learning. Most of the educators who share concerns about the impact of standardized testing teach in PK through grade eight classrooms. Educators said that standardized testing influences key aspects of students' educational experience: tightening schedules, restricting course availability, distorting students' perceptions of themselves as learners, and even forcing teachers to teach in ways they do not believe are in students' best interest. Schooling was at times depicted as a preparation for standardized testing, rather than as an experience designed for human development.

A focus on test scores themselves is considered problematic at least partially because many students put minimal effort into taking tests given their perceived lack of relevance. Teachers question the value of test scores they know are impacted by random guessing and

rushing through an unpleasant experience, and some wonder if this approach to test taking may lead students to devalue other school experiences.

Teachers also talked about a felt loss of autonomy due to district policies, such as rigid schedules and accounting for instructional minutes meant to drive higher test scores, which unintentionally disallow relationship building and student-centered learning. While some educators say that they understand the need for some testing, they wonder how school could nevertheless be reorganized around developing a drive to learn and joy in learning and achievement assessed through more meaningful measures of success. Participants wonder if we are seeing positive results from what many experienced educators consider a failed pedagogical experiment.

One educator speaks for many when he expresses frustration with standardized testing, noting "we're teaching to a test and we're not teaching to a curriculum." There is also growing recognition that standardized testing may not capture the full range of student abilities or prepare them for real-world success. Another educator argues that "kids don't need to know how to take tests. They're not going to live their life taking tests."

Maine Learning Results and Local Curriculum Choices

Many educators express concern about meeting standards while also doing what's right for their students, as Amelia emphasizes, "the pressure of meeting all of the standards is so huge that we're losing sight of child development and expectations." Teachers feel constrained by rigid schedules required to accommodate an ever-growing list of standards, leading to less time for creativity, relationship-building, and individualized instruction. One educator states, "More standards is not better teaching and is not quality learning. They don't go hand in hand necessarily."

Educators share a common concern that current standards are not achievable unless students' basic needs are met first:

> *We're not going to sustain or have enough stamina. It's exhaustion. And those kids are never going to reach the benchmark if those other needs are not met. I mean we are stuck spinning our wheels in the ditch because they're not getting all these other basic needs met and being able to play and collaborate and their social needs. So they're never going to meet that benchmark. So the benchmark doesn't matter anymore.*

State standards are seen as burdensome by many teachers, who often describe them as nearly impossible to meet. Reducing and simplifying the standards, not lowering expectations for students, was the most common remedy shared. Quality and depth are valued over quantity and superficiality. (Five standards per subject per grade was suggested by one Aroostook County educator.) Unreasonable expectations of teachers can be pushed down onto students in high school too. Many high school students describe unyielding teacher expectations that don't

recognize their lives outside school, including jobs, family, and sports and leave them feeling exhausted and not able to be successful.

Teachers in kindergarten and early grades spoke specifically about being given developmentally inappropriate curricula in what they saw as a misguided effort to increase test scores or meet standards. Additionally, teachers say curriculum pacing guides don't allow for adequate review time and assume all students learn at the same pace and in the same way. Students can easily fall behind the set pace, and parents, teachers, and even older students shared the negative impact on self-confidence and engagement when this occurs. No time in the day, week, or year for "catching up" can lead to burnout at even the elementary school level, according to some parents and teachers. High school students in one conversation describe the loss of the natural drive to learn in elementary school, when their school focused so exclusively on reading and math scores that it limited class time spent on anything else.

We also heard that play has become less and less a part of kindergarten and elementary school to allow for more academic instructional time aimed at increasing test scores. Teachers often see the shift away from play as developmentally inappropriate and, ultimately, backfiring, depriving students of necessary breaks from intellectual work and opportunities to develop social skills, relationships, and feelings of happiness and joyfulness at school that lead to attendance and engagement.

Local Accountability

While there is broad agreement across groups that standardized testing has not led to better outcomes for students, despite the burden it places on teachers and students, there is no consensus on a particular solution. Rather there is a desire to refocus on quality, accountability, and rigor as defined by students, educators, parents, and community members.

Relationships-First

Strong student-teacher relationships are understood to be the core infrastructure of learning, well-being, and belonging in schools. These relationships are seen not as an "add-on," but as the mechanism through which relevance, motivation, accountability, and the psychological safety needed for intellectual risk taking are established. This emphasis comports with our findings on the "what": Durable human skills, interpersonal skills in particular, are highly valued.

Educators emphasize care, encouragement, and attentiveness—particularly for students carrying heavy burdens from home—while also framing relationships as the pathway for knowing students well enough to adapt instruction, reduce overreliance on testing, and teach social skills. Students echo this view, consistently linking their willingness to engage, try hard, and attend school to whether they feel known, respected, and treated as whole people. Across both groups, relationships are associated with trust, emotional regulation, and a sense of mattering, and are strengthened by time, smaller student-teacher ratios, schedule and curriculum

flexibility, and learning environments that promote shared problem-solving, dialogue, and accountability within a climate of care.

Educators tend to frame relationships in professional and systemic terms, as emotionally demanding work that requires time, training, administrative support, and flexibility in schedules, class sizes, discipline practices, and curriculum pacing. They emphasize their role as caring adults and models of "good adulthood," balancing nurturing with holding students accountable. Educators also express concern about burnout when relational labor is undervalued or crowded out by standards and instructional mandates. However, many teachers shared how impactful they know good relationships to be for students, with some describing those relationships as contributing to their own sense of wellbeing and pride in their work.

Students, by contrast, describe relationships primarily through lived experience: they want teachers who see them as individuals, listen to their perspectives, respect confidentiality, and demonstrate emotional intelligence through calm, non-shaming interactions. Students are especially sensitive to breaches of trust, teacher dysregulation, sarcasm, and perceived indifference, while valuing warmth, fairness, and inclusion in decision-making while recognizing teachers' authority. Parents too shared appreciation for the benefits their children receive from close relationships with their teachers.

Institutional structures and rigidly enforced standardized curricula seemed to be the main obstacles to better student-teacher relationships.

Respect for Students' Voices

Students and educators alike emphasize the critical need for authentic student voice in shaping school experiences to ensure relevant, engaging, and equitable education. Educators generally describe their students as willing to speak up to advocate for themselves and others. However, many participants also think students should have more voice in their own learning experience (what they learn, how they learn it, and how their learning is assessed) at all grade levels, with increasing voice in older grades so that learning can be tailored to interest and career pathways. Participants who discussed this topic also share a belief that students should have a voice in creating school policies.

For students to be able to share their perspectives, trust in teachers and administrators and opportunities to develop their perspectives and articulate them well through interaction with others are necessary. When schools provide structured ways for students to develop and share their perspective and adults truly listen and respond, students are more likely to share their voice. Rural adult participants were more likely to discuss student voice as a mechanism for retaining students in local communities post graduation; they argue that if students have a voice in their community, they will feel more invested and more likely to stay.

An educator describes the importance of student voice, saying,

> *I think listening to kids more, and like she said, 'I'm not going to use this, so I'm not going to put any effort into this. But if I'm passionate about something, then I'm going to really work hard.' And I think that that's something that we really have to focus on is what are the needs and what do kids want? Where are we going with this? And I think that's really important, giving them a voice, a choice, listening to their needs more.*

There is a strong push overall for schools to move to a model where teachers are a "facilitator of rich learning that's directed by students within a context, within a framework, but voice and choice."

Educators and students across generations recognize that fostering a student's voice means more than offering choices—it requires listening deeply and acting on what is heard. Students want more than token representation, challenging the effectiveness of traditional structures. For example, one student argues that "[s]tudent council just feels like another adult controlled group. It's just another school grounded group and the adults that are running are going to tell you, this is what you're going to be passionate about." Many students express frustration that decisions are often made by adults without meaningful input from those most affected. As another student expresses, "include youth voices and listen to us. You have this conversation, listen to us and actually take action with it." Without genuine opportunities for input and ownership, students feel disengaged and undervalued, as highlighted by a third student who explains "if you don't get your opinion out and like, heard, you're just gonna learn to not even bother speaking your opinion. You're just gonna keep it inside."

Relevance for Students

There is strong consensus that public school education has been too rigid and standardized to serve all students well. Participants across groups recognize that students naturally vary in interests, learning abilities, and learning styles and that some students don't find what they need in the standard academic program. While recent years brought a national push for universal college preparation, participants broadly agree that this goal was neither practical nor desirable: society needs people in the trades and a wide range of careers, and many students are better suited to those pathways by interest and disposition.

Participants endorse allowing multiple pathways both during and after high school, but note that traditional structures and common learning standards make this difficult to fully realize. Several call for more guidance staff to help students select courses aligned with their interests and goals; some high school students report feeling poorly advised and arriving at college without key prerequisite courses. Participants also argue that career and pathway exploration should begin earlier, so students have time to reflect on what suits them. Beyond the academic-versus-vocational dichotomy, participants emphasize the need for greater flexibility in meeting graduation credit requirements, more student choice across both core and non-core courses,

including the arts, and the development of Individualized Learning Plans for all students, not only those in special education. Many teachers also called for the return of thematically-oriented units in PK, kindergarten, and elementary school.

Hands-On Learning

Both adults and students emphasize the need to incorporate more hands-on learning for all students in school, at all grade levels. They feel that hands-on learning was more present in schools in the past, but has grown rare. Participants note the benefits of using more varied instructional approaches to help all learners and more active learning strategies rather than passive learning. Participants describe various ways they have seen hands-on learning in their schools which include having students physically work on something with their hands, often collaboratively with others, and sometimes outside the classroom (e.g., building a birdhouse, planting a garden, conducting a lab experiment, changing a tire), but they also talk about hands-on learning in the sense of getting real-world experience with something, applying concepts they've learned, seeing how something works up close, trying something out through a field trip experience, internship, or in-depth project.

Related to their interest in doing more hands-on learning, participants, students in particular, note the negative impact of having students spend most of their day sitting in chairs, in front of computers, with minimal social interactions, and little time outside. The downside of this common picture of school-based learning is that students become bored, mentally overloaded, and sometimes stressed. Students suggest that more frequent mental and physical breaks are needed during the school day, some time outdoors, time for play, and more time for physical education, which has been reduced over the years. Participants acknowledge that developing hands-on learning activities may be more demanding for teachers in terms of instructional planning, and some teachers may benefit from professional development to support this practice.

Skills for human interaction and self-management were universally seen to be best learned through active practice. Some students express a lack of opportunity for practicing interpersonal skills, in particular, at school, outside of sports or extracurriculars, given short passing periods and classes that do not permit or integrate discussion. Some students identify more discussion-based classes and classes where they experience a variety of perspectives as being necessary to building the durable human skills they need to succeed. Many participants see early childhood education, recess, arts, extracurriculars, and community-based experiences as especially powerful sites for this learning. Ultimately, there is a recognized need to foster interpersonal skills, through a variety of avenues in addition to direct instruction, such as experiential learning and community involvement, in order to prepare individuals to navigate complex social environments and build sustaining relationships.

Responsive to the Emerging Future

While some participants describe ways their schools are already trying to meet the diverse needs and interests of students through curriculum or instructional changes, the majority of participants express the need for change. They feel changes are needed for the purpose of one, re-engaging students who feel disinterested, unmotivated, or constrained by the traditional curriculum and school structures, and two, to better prepare students for the changes happening in society that will impact the kinds of skills they need after high school. For participants, "agility in the curriculum" means being more responsive to societal changes and allowing more flexibility for teachers to teach to the students and students to pursue learning in different ways that is relevant and meaningful to them and who they want to become.

Adults and students view the curriculum as too fixed in tradition where subjects are taught in isolation without connection areas, without direct applications to authentic, real-world problems and contexts, and little flexibility for students to learn about specific topics that interest them within subject areas or beyond. Suggestions focus on updating what is taught in school (both curriculum and skills) and what is required for high school graduation (allowing time for more electives), more varied practices or choice in how learning takes place (more learning outside the school in the community or outdoor learning, hands-on or experiential learning, project-based learning, more focus on developing critical thinking and skills rather than memorization of facts), and the way school time is structured, students are grouped, and learning pathways students might choose.

Many agree with one educator who suggests, "curricula and just school structures, in general, are going to need to become more nimble and more adaptable."

Right for Educators

Consistently across geography and conversation, maybe the most consistent subtheme of all, is that educators are feeling squeezed. Teachers entered the workforce feeling a sense of purpose and identity as a professional, but standardization of almost every aspect of their work and the impossible demands placed on them have eroded both. The standardization has left many feeling burned out physically, drained the joy out of teaching, left them feeling inadequate and unsuccessful regardless of their workload, and caused them to feel mistrusted and almost invisible. A feeling of impossibility of meeting expectations, even when breaks, vacations, and weekends are used for work, weighs heavily. Teachers do not appear to want less work, they want to be able to use their professional knowledge to shape their teaching more and they want to be successful. Right now many feel like they have neither. Loss of autonomy in most areas of teaching, from what, to how much, to when, and even where, means that educators are not able to exercise professional judgment. Many see this loss tying back to districts' need to perform on standardized tests.

Teachers across Maine are facing challenges that threaten both their success and their satisfaction in the profession. Many describe feeling overwhelmed by increasing workloads,

insufficient support, and unrealistic expectations, leading to burnout. Teachers call for smaller class sizes, more classroom support, and greater autonomy. Students across the state shared that sentiment, as one reflects, "I think teachers would really benefit from smaller class sizes and more teachers." A community member poses the question, "How are we going to take care of the teachers that are taking care of the children to prevent that burnout and help them be successful to do their jobs without burning out?"

The pressure to meet rigid standards and use scripted curricula often strips away the creativity and joy that once defined teaching; as one educator notes, "It seems like now everything is so scripted. You have to meet this standard. This is what you have to do and this is your curriculum." Many educators feel that their expertise is undervalued and that they are burdened with responsibilities beyond teaching, such as managing behavioral issues and providing emotional support without adequate resources. A teacher shares that "I just need somebody to monitor so I can feel like I'm being successful. I don't feel like I'm being successful as a teacher with this group that I have because their needs aren't being met." One teacher shares what many expressed, a feeling of not being able to be successful in their role as educators: “I feel like that's become so rigid that teachers have just adopted this vision of, ‘I have to do this and this amount of time and I have to do,’ where they don't feel like they have the time to do all these other things and give students what they truly need in that moment." Compounding these issues are low salaries and a lack of respect for the profession, with teachers expressing frustration that "after 15 years, you're lucky if you get 45 [thousand dollars] whatever."

In the wake of more common school shootings, some teachers feel the profession has become more dangerous. Hailey expressed her and her students’ shared concern for their physical safety at school: “I have kids that still come in today and say, ‘When are we going to practice for this? Because I want to be prepared,’ or, ‘Why is this happening?’ Building up the anxiety of coming to school. I know my first day walking into the building I'm in, my first thought this summer was, ‘Oh great,’ I walk in the door and boom, my room's right there.” But the impact of teachers worrying for their physical safety at work has rarely been acknowledged meaningfully in terms of the expectations we have and what we provide for teachers.

Support from administrators and the broader community is seen as critical, yet often lacking. One retired educator echoed what teachers desire but don’t feel they receive: “I think of places like Finland and other places where the teacher is really an honored person in society.” The cumulative effect is a profession at risk, with warnings that one teacher points out, "if things aren't viewed differently and looked at differently of how teachers are treated, and how that looks, there aren't going to be any people going into the industry anymore."

The WHERE

Everywhere

This section describes participants' view on where learning is best done: Everywhere. Within that frame, we identified three themes: Flexible Learning Environments, Community Collaboration, and Vocational Integration. But first we address the question of "home versus school" with regards to social-emotional learning and interpersonal skills. These skills were of the highest priorities to Mainers in the study, and they come with particular questions about who is responsible for developing them in Maine's youth.

Home or School?

Interpersonal skills and SEL, what we described as part of durable human skills useful for relating to oneself and others in a variety of settings, have sometimes been considered beyond the scope of the educators' job. And indeed, there was some disagreement among participants about whether schools should be responsible for teaching these skills or if families should carry primary responsibility. And then there is the question of who is *able* to carry this responsibility. Educators' plates are overflowing already. Parents' plates are full too.

However, educators and parents both tend to say that students do need to learn interpersonal skills *at school*. This tends to be based on observations that far more children than was the case in previous decades do not seem to be learning self-management, perseverance, empathy, collaboration, etc. *outside* of school. The impact on classroom learning environments when students do not internalize SEL skills in particular can, itself, have tremendous negative impact on teachers' ability to succeed, pushing some teachers to feel caught between saying they can't take on "additional" content and realizing that if they don't do it, they may pay the consequences in needing to manage increasing negative behaviors in the classroom.

Community members too feel that students should learn interpersonal and SEL skills at school through time spent in social activities. They see value to the full community from the "social capital" students gain when time is spent socializing at school; meeting a future business partner in class is not out of the question, said one participant. Many community members also shared examples of organizations ready to support, or already supporting, schools and parents in fostering healthy social-emotional lives of local youth. So while schools are generally viewed as a central venue for developing skills for human interaction because "that's where the kids are," most participants also stress that learning goals in this area cannot be fully accomplished by schools alone and require reinforcement by families, communities, and broader social norms modeled by adults.

The answer we heard was that schools, community members, and community organizations share responsibility for educating students with families, leveraging their relative strengths and available resources to ensure all students have the essentials. This idea, that PK-12 schools are one of many community organizations that collaborate with parents and extended families to support the growth and development of young people was understood by participants

to be applicable to most educational needs, beyond interpersonal skills and SEL. School was envisioned very clearly by some participants as a hub, connecting students with important adults—those with expertise, interest, resources, or future connections to other community members—and community members with each other through service in the school.

Below we describe in more detail how participants describe flexible learning environments, community collaboration, and vocational integration as three specific pathways Maine can use to broaden students' experiences and shape their perceptions of where and when learning happens. Learning is believed to be a lifelong pursuit, not something that happens exclusively while seated at a desk in a classroom of same-age peers, in a school building with a bell schedule, inhabited only by professional educators and young people. However, most Maine students spend the vast majority of their schooling time in traditional classrooms similar to ones their great-grandparents learned in, save for the addition of screens. Mainers envision something different.

Flexible Learning Environments

Flexibility is desired in the location of schooling as well as the quality of the spaces, including an expanded conception of who can be, or should be, present. Participants describe ways that schools can provide more flexibility in students' learning environment as a means to increase relevance and engagement, deepen relational and intellectual connections, and even improve health. For example, they recommend using outdoor spaces for learning; offering different kinds of seating choices within classrooms; allowing students to move around more within experiential, hands-on, active learning activities rather than spending time in passive learning modes based on teacher demonstrations, books, and computer-based learning; having some unstructured time during the school day for interests and relationships to develop; opening the doors to the greater community to engage with students; and having older students work with younger students.

Participants describe some of the ways their schools are making learning environments more flexible, to a limited extent. These experiences include teachers conducting lessons and educational activities outdoors, field trips to places in the community or beyond, community service projects, and internships or training that happens outside the school. While participants feel that positive things are already happening in some classrooms and schools, they feel much more could be done to support flexible learning environments both within school and outside the school building in all schools, as a way of educating, not as an extra.

Participants, both adults and students, describe the benefits of having students work beyond the confines of the school building and classroom, which includes more opportunities for students to make authentic choices about their learning, more engagement and excitement about learning in general, and healthier minds and bodies from time outdoors and more physical activity.

Community Collaboration

Adults routinely told us that their communities need youth to develop empathy, care, and skills for problem solving and collaboration along with other core capacities for civic engagement in order to effectively work with others to solve local problems. Community service is also seen as an essential pathway to instill civic responsibility. Some participants imagine a collaboration between school and community to ensure these skills are learned by all students, perhaps in a course “that kind of walks people through this is what we do in this town and this is how we all work together.” Youth would likely welcome such a course, as they told us that the time when they most feel they matter is when they are volunteering in their community. As one student argues “I think volunteering could help. I think if you, if you try to put yourself in somebody else's shoes, then that can be a great experience.”

This hands-on approach is echoed in the belief that students benefit from "giving them sort of real experiences and taking them out into the community, showing them what's out there and making them part of the community and part of everything that we do and where we go as adults and take them along with us to show them how to do it and what to do next." The importance of fostering agency and feelings of empowerment is clear: "When kids feel empowered and have agency, I think that they can understand that they have a broader role. And I think that's really important because I think we're in an increasingly difficult position” with people not feeling agency. Students who see they have a clear way to contribute meaningfully will feel more empowered to act, and as rural residents in particular indicated, they may feel more committed to staying and investing in the community that welcomes their contributions.

Participants emphasize the importance of schools making strong connections with their communities, and note that this relationship is a two-way street that takes effort on both parts. Schools can open their doors to community, but community organizations, businesses, and even individuals can also reach out to form partnerships with schools. For example, one municipality with a Boys & Girls Club found that some programming could be provided right at the school, instead of relying on school buses to bring students across town after school. This new arrangement can save money while increasing the number of students who can access valuable educational programming.

Both adults and students saw positive benefits for both the school and for communities when they find ways to partner. Schools can gain more support through effective community engagement and communication, addressing programmatic and funding gaps by leveraging resources available within their communities or regions. Teachers can tap local businesses and local adults to make connections for students between academic learning and application in the “real” world. Students can benefit from these experiences engaging with adults, children, businesses, and organizations in their communities by developing a sense of pride in place, feeling more part of their community and feeling valued, learning about potential career and work options, and strengthening their self-confidence. They would also simply have greater exposure to a wider variety of people, careers, hobbies, experiences, ideas, emotions, and

interpersonal dynamics to inform their understanding of the world and their choices and aspirations at a formative stage in their lives.

Community collaboration, however, needs coordination, which may mean increased staffing for schools. Some community members or educators take on this work themselves, but in other places when no clear coordinator is designated, the bridges simply are not built. Participants feel that, in some cases, additional resources might be needed to support school-community partnerships, to fund field trips, programming provided by community organizations or individuals, and additional teaching staff. A librarian shared with us that the infrastructure already in place for his organization could potentially be leveraged to support a channel for educators, students, and community members to share needs and resources, ideally even matching students with potential mentors who share their interests.

To note is the reality faced by smaller, rural communities where fewer local opportunities exist for the school-community partnerships and for students to find work or mentoring, a challenge compounded by a lack of public transit and strained district transportation resources. Students in particular lamented the lack of opportunities in terms of a variety of afterschool activities, jobs, internships, nudging community members in some areas to begin to think creatively about potential transit collaborations between municipalities and school districts.

Vocational Integration

Learning can take place through real world experiences that help students develop aspirations and the plans to reach them. Across students, teachers, and community members, vocational integration is framed less as a narrow "career and technical" track and more as a coherent PK-12 approach that helps young people see how academic learning connects to their current interests, real work, community contribution, and future pathways.

The dominant idea is *early and sustained exposure*: beginning in the elementary or middle grades with clear links between content being taught and purpose, expanding in middle school through broad exploration of ways adults contribute to the world, and deepening in high school via job shadowing, internships, certifications, and community-based experiences. Participants consistently emphasize variety, relevance, and authenticity—vocational integration should include meaningful engagement with different kinds of work, including arts, trades, civic roles, and emerging fields. There is also a shared concern about equity and access, particularly in rural areas, where transportation, limited local opportunities, and reliance on external grants constrain participation.

Vocational integration is understood to expand "the essentials" to include durable human skills, including social-emotional learning, and practical understanding of how individuals contribute to their communities and economies, but just as importantly, vocational integration is about acknowledging that students should get "credit" towards a diploma for their achievements in internships and summer jobs as much as skills built in career and technical programs.

However, it remains to be decided how schools can track students' proficiency or mastery gained in these experiences relative to Maine Learning Results.

Within this theme, both students and adults were interested in vocational integration, but with slightly different angles. Students focus most sharply on relevance and agency: they want earlier exposure, clearer purpose in their coursework, concrete tools to evaluate career options, and flexible "branching" pathways after a shared academic core, while also feeling pressure to choose too soon and recognizing that families cannot reliably provide exposure to varied careers. Educators emphasize readiness for adult life and programmatic structure, highlighting the importance of social, interpersonal, and emotional skills for success in the world of work, the need to reduce stigma around technical education, and the fragility of vocational opportunities that depend on grants rather than core school budgets. Community members foreground workforce and civic concerns, stressing the need to build strong work ethic in youth, compensate students for internships, address transportation barriers in suburban and rural areas, and use local institutions—businesses, town committees, and volunteer roles—as sites of vocational learning. While all three groups agree that exposure and integration matter, students prioritize meaning and choice, teachers value preparation and point to the institutional support needed, and community members value labor participation though they acknowledge logistics challenges.

The Major Challenges

Low Motivation, Home Instability and Insecurity, and Resource Scarcity

While there is strong agreement about how to move forward, there are equally clear challenges that must be addressed if Maine is to achieve its aspirations. Schools, and our education system as a whole, have increasingly taken on these challenges over the past few decades: feeding children and families, providing housing resources, partnering with healthcare providers, recruiting volunteers to entice absentees onto the school bus, writing grant applications to fill budget gaps, and more. Yet the problems have not gone away, and have, according to participants, only worsened in many areas. We found three major themes weaving through the stories we heard across the state: Low motivation and engagement, home instability and insecurity, and resource scarcity. We describe each one below, leaning heavily on quotes from participants to tell their own stories.

Motivation and Engagement

Student engagement and motivation are persistent challenges identified across all participant groups, from future employers to community organization leaders and students of all ages. This topic was by far the area of greatest concern, indicating attention put here could have real impact.

Many educators and students note a decline in intrinsic drive and a shift in what motivates learners today. As one educator observes, "I find the kids today are just not motivated.

It's kind of like what she said, they don't seem to care." This sentiment is echoed by students themselves, who cite one of their biggest personal obstacles to success is “motivation and not giving up whenever you hit a problem, just to push through." One notes, "I also need my teacher to really push me and really motivate me.”

Good relationships with their teachers are crucial to engagement and success according to students. Students across the state share appreciation for their teachers. However, students indicated that teachers are not always available and reliance on independent online learning in particular has increased:

> *But teachers today are kind of just like, ‘Go on your laptop and look it up. If you need help, just go on Google Classroom.’ I kind of wish that teachers were more like, ‘Yes, you can come see me, I'll be here,’ not just redirecting to your laptop like always and everything's online. And I just think a more in-person helping hand would be better and it would keep us more organized honestly.*

An alternative education student, describes disengaging and eventually not attending school because he felt embarrassed and dismissed by his teacher:

> *Well, pretty much the reason I'm in this program [is] because in sixth grade we had a math teacher, most people did not like her. Anytime you didn't do your homework or you did it wrong or whatever, she'd get mad at you for it. And when you had a missing assignment, she would put it on the board for everyone to see. And you would ask for help and she would get impatient. And you're going to keep falling behind because of that. You don't want to go ask her help because she's just going to get impatient, get upset. So it just keeps going and with a whole year, you lose a lot and it takes a lot to catch back up.*

Laurie sees relationships at the center of ongoing student engagement:

> *I've also found that, when you have a good positive relationship with a student, they feel they can approach you more easily. And so, if they're struggling with something, they're more likely to be like, ‘Can you say that again?’ Or ‘Can you help me with this?’ They don't feel threatened or they don't feel like anxious about asking certain things.*

A high school senior says many of his peers don’t have adults at home who instill a motivation to learn. He explains the need for a drive to learn and succeed as something that must be developed early or students disengage, often causing behavior problems as a result:

> *And I think to like really be able to succeed in whatever you're, whatever you want to do in life, you really just need to have like the drive to…the ambition to actually go through with your plans. And I think that a lot of*

times the school, like as 8th graders or freshmen, people just start to like, check out really early and not like, they're just not engaged. And it just sets them up to keep doing that the rest of their high school career.

Teachers also point to external factors, such as technology use and unstable home lives, impacting students' engagement in learning at all ages. One educator remarks on the impact of short-form media, “like the steady decline in kids’ ability to just like have stamina in reading and to like follow a story because of like the reduced, like the reels and all the super short things.” Another summarizes what educators across the state shared: “Many, many years ago the motivation was there a lot more than it is today with a bigger population. And I think a lot of it has to do with, we went through with COVID, family life has changed tremendously.” Educators, particularly in rural and urban schools, shared this sentiment:

I just feel bad for some, because a lot of times at the end of the day it's, ‘when I go to the office because I don't know where I'm going, I don't know if I'm going to my mom's, my stepmom's, my grandparents,’ and they're confused, they're little kids and they're trying to grow. When they don't have that stability, I find it's hard for them to know and enjoy what life is because their mind is so busy that a lot of time they don't even have time to get the education that they need from here because they got too much on their plate.

Some educators also indicate that the strong shift toward dual-earner households has resulted in lowered expectations for family engagement that can impact student motivation and achievement: “I used to send books home and the kids would read them to their parents and they'd sign a little... I don't do it anymore because either I don't get the book back or I get the book back and well, we didn't have time to read or my mom didn't have time to read. My mom was working and I couldn't read to her... It's changed.”

Despite these challenges, there are actionable strategies that foster engagement. Providing learning opportunities that students feel are relevant to current interests and their longer term plans is one. Experiential learning is also repeatedly highlighted as effective:

I think pie in the sky, if you said what should education look like? Experiential learning, our students need to be experiencing... If we keep just cramming content down their throats, we're going to continue to lose their interest and we're going to miss out on some really good opportunity to work on not only the content but the skills at the same time.

As Avery says, "The more fun you have, the more you're gonna learn." Many adults said that “experiences” were in and of themselves essential, meaning that bringing students out of the classroom and into the “real world” to attend a concert, visit a city, camp in the woods, meet a senator, participate in a sport, etc. had intrinsic value but also engagement value. “That’s what

they'll remember," and experiences that broaden their view develops new interests and gives curiosity about the world chance to grow.

Creating engaging, experiential learning experiences relies on teachers knowing their students and what matters to them. An educator asks:

> *How do you design environments where students can thrive if given authentic problems to tackle or the experiential learning process was more valued than the final product…I think a way to shift the system would be how do you coach people on how to design those learning environments, where students can thrive…And then I get to know all of my students. I build those relationships. I know what they're passionate about, what motivates them, what their strengths are, right?*

Home Instability and Insecurity

Many students today face significant instability and insecurity at home, with shifting family structures, financial hardship, and inconsistent parental support shaping their daily lives. This lack of stability often leaves children confused and overwhelmed, as one educator observes:

> *A lot of broken homes now, as compared to the past. A lot of blended families. Sometimes the kids don't know whether they're going to mom's or they're going to dad's. And if they're at mom's, well, some of the stuff stays at dad's and their homework is, 'oh, well I was at mom's last night, but my homework is at dad's.' There's just a lot of that going on, and I think that's really, really hard. Another thing is that there's a lot of lack of support.*

Even sleep is something many educators said is disrupted by lack of stability at home: "It reminds me of a student, his school starts at, he'd get off the bus at 8:00 and he'd be napping by 9:00 or 10:00. He'd nap for an hour because if we wouldn't let him sleep, he would do nothing. That's just, even home life has changed. It gets harder and harder I think each year."

The economic pressures are equally daunting, with students and families struggling to meet basic needs. Schools and communities are increasingly stepping in to fill these gaps, providing food, emotional support, healthcare, and a sense of safety that may be missing at home. One educator stresses this point, explaining:

> *When they come into our school, we're cooking breakfast with them because they don't have breakfast at home. I work with a lot of kids who come from extreme poverty, food insecurity, and huge amounts of trauma. And so I think, whether or not schools like it or were originally intended to be so…I think schools have become that sort of first aid, unfortunately, of recognizing, 'Okay, this child does need resources, they're not safe at home,' or they become a safety net.*

Despite these challenges, many students were described as demonstrating remarkable resilience, especially in the wake of the pandemic. One educator shares what a remarkably large

number of educators believe, “And one of the questions that asked, what does this generation bring to the table? It's resilience. I'm actually really motivated by this next generation.”

Substance abuse is casting a shadow over community health and student learning, with educators and community members witnessing its deepening impact across generations. As one teacher observes,

> *I've been teaching for over 30 years, and I can say that the biggest obstacle that I've ever witnessed get in the way of a child thriving and becoming their best self would be…a struggling family unit. Whether that be due to drug abuse or some form of addiction or some type of violence, a struggling unit. A struggling unit doesn't provide that role modeling and doesn't provide, I believe, the hope that things can get better and be better.*

The consequences ripple into the classroom, as described by a teacher, "I have four of them that their parents are involved in drugs, but they're also expected to come to school to learn. And for some of them, for most of them, it's just impossible. We didn't have this problem. I mean, was drugs a problem? Yeah, it was. That's certainly not like it is today."

The effects extend beyond academics, undermining students' sense of safety, stability, and self-worth. This concern is captured by one community member, who states, "children don't ask to be born into poverty, they don't ask to be born to drug addicted parents, and we have to give them a fighting chance. That's the best gift that we could give them, and I do believe they'll give back." Community members also note the broader consequences, including one who notes, "We grew up safe. We never had to lock our doors. We went to school and we didn't have to worry. But I do think that now we have this uptake of substance use that is starting to make that a little different."

Teachers and community members advocate for a holistic approach that integrates substance abuse education and community support, as noted by an educator, who states

> *I would love to see on a state level basis is that DOE and the CDC actually work together. That would be lovely. And then support our district leaders around that particular subject for sure. Because we get 476 students in the school and 35% of them are using, that's a lot of kids. And that's a lot of time. And it's a lot of time for not only our principal but all those other people and our superintendent spends an awful lot of time on that.*

Student perspectives are often closer to the problem and tinged with emotion. Stories include noticing their peers spending learning time vaping in bathrooms and others not coming to school. One student shares many students’ frustrations about what seems to be a problem in schools across the state, vaping in school bathrooms: “I think my school in particular lacks a huge sense of accountability and proper repercussions because you, you can see. You can smell it in the bathrooms. It's just, it's ridiculous. And all the school does is just kick you out of school

for a week. And all that does is give them an opportunity to do more dumb stuff. Instead of correcting behavior, they just punish it." Kaitlyn, on the other hand, shares a very personal story in the hopes of helping other students who struggle with addiction and its impacts:

> *Going through drug abuse for myself and then getting pregnant and all of that, it really set me back. It set me back an entire year. I was a senior at that point, and I needed to graduate that year. I got it done. I had a lot…I didn't know if I was going to make it. My mom didn't think I was going to make it. My mom was like, 'Kid, you're not graduating this year. You might want to just realize you're not going to do it.' I proved her wrong. I proved my entire family wrong. I've proved people that have the assumptions about teen moms wrong, and that's what I'm here for.*

The collective sentiment is that the prevalence of substance abuse in families and in students themselves, necessitates a reevaluation of educational and community investment priorities.

Schools today are expected to do far more than teach academics; they are increasingly responsible for meeting students' basic needs and managing a growing list of demands from families and society. The combination of growing student need with increasing pressure to meet state standards and increase test scores, can place a heavy burden on teachers' shoulders, one that some teachers said feels unsustainable.

Kelly notes the change over time in the role educators, and schools, are expected to play as families have become less stable and less financially secure:

> *Kids came to school to learn academics, but now kids come to school and we have to teach them basic life skills. We've focused so much on teaching manners and now we have social-emotional programs where we teach them about their feelings and how to identify their feelings and how to talk about their feelings and how to share and all those things. And those things always used to be like in your family, you learned that from your parents, from your cousins, your aunts and uncles, your grandparents. You learned how to express yourself through that. And the kids, they get everything from school now, I find. They get their meals at school. The school is responsible for so much more than it used to be.*

Teachers express concern that "the expectations keep going up but at the same time we're not able to have the time that we need to really teach those basic social emotions," and that "we're not just trying to do the school curriculum, we're trying to be the mom and the dad too, and the nurse and the psychologist and the therapist." Standardized curricula with strict pacing guides and the sheer number of state standards put additional pressure on educators who are already straining with expanded roles. Teachers and support staff describe standards and curricula that make teaching harder because they are not appropriate for children's developmental

stage: The “pressure of meeting all of the standards is so huge that we're losing sight of child development and expectations.” Others emphasize not being able to meet required standards within the number of minutes, days, and weeks in the year: “Every new standard that's added or curriculum piece feels like this extra weight is added on and it's, okay, well what's getting taken off? Oh, nothing's getting taken off. So it just gets heavier. And I know our students can sense that.”

The result is a sense of burnout and a call from some educators for “more support and lower expectations,” meaning more realistic expectations of what teachers can accomplish while also working to provide foundational feelings of stability and security and the essential social-emotional skills for basic functioning in a classroom setting.

Resource Scarcity

Access to essential educational resources remains a persistent challenge across Maine’s schools, with participants highlighting gaps in food quality, transportation, mental health support, higher level courses, and extracurricular opportunities in particular. Some of these issues are related to low levels of funding and others seem to be related to limited access to tangible resources, not directly related to funding available. And while many schools face these challenges, there is also a pattern: Rural schools have less access to resources that suburban and urban schools may take for granted. This is not always solely due to dollars and cents; sometimes it is related to distance or qualified teacher availability.

The struggle to provide adequate nutrition was echoed by several voices including a student, who described what we heard from other students too, "The quantity is terrible. And you can't have seconds. So they make something that isn't big enough, if you're still hungry after, you just have to deal with it." Similarly, an educator questions the inconsistency between messaging and practice, arguing, “How can you continuously be told nutrition, food, and nutritious foods are so important…and then look at what we’re feeding our students. Like, that tells you that we don’t care.”

Transportation has become more and more costly to districts since the pandemic, with some districts not being able to hire qualified staff and others skimping on vehicle maintenance, which can cause problems longer term. As one community member noted, "I think reliable transportation is also needed to get them to school. We've had some challenges in our own district with keeping bus drivers, and that is vital as well." At least one district we visited reported students missing days or a week when a bus driver was not available or a bus was broken; parents said they could not bring their children to school.

Mental health and individualized support are also both critical to student success and provided unevenly across the state. An educator shares, “And so then we see the statistics of mental health struggles and suicide rates go up. Right? And all of these things just go up and up and up. And we're not actually doing anything to implement the support that they need in things.” Students suggest that having therapists more available in schools could be crucial,

emphasizing the need for accessible mental health services: “The whole therapist thing being more advertised and just be more available for students is definitely a big thing.”

Resource accessibility issues extend to academic and enrichment opportunities, especially in rural or smaller schools. One student shares that "I think it'd be better if we had more class options. But again, that's coming back to how we're such a small school.” Another student expresses frustration with limited opportunities for going deeper into academic coursework: “But I feel like even if, like, there's people who want to, like, learn and do their best here, it's hard to. That's what I was, the point I was trying to make. It's hard to because there's not a lot of proper academic opportunities here.” Students mention online learning opportunities, such as some early college classes or certain platforms offering both basic academic and specialized classes, that are designed to expand course offerings at smaller or less wealthy schools. However, some said that they preferred in-person learning with a teacher or professor they can interact with directly, with a few going as far as saying early college opportunities are not a good value because they do not simulate real university experiences.

Some students in Aroostook County reflected on the opportunity for a regional high school and said it expands their opportunities enough to make longer transportation worth it, especially since they travel for activities already:

> *I do theater in Fort Kent every single, like, almost every day. And it's 30 minutes there, 30 minutes back. That is the only program we have in the Valley…If we had this school, not only would we have different opportunities for classes to get the experience we need for, like, our jobs, we could see if we want this, but we would get better programs.*

Educators at a variety of rural schools reflect on the lack of opportunities available to their students, explaining, “The kids who are different and have different interests, there's not much for them. There's only the sports. I mean, we don't even have an art program." Students in more rural areas consistently told us that they felt they lacked the opportunities and resources they know their “down state” peers enjoy, from college visits to higher level mathematics to accessible school counselors and nurses.

Implications for Policymakers

Scope and Context

The scope of this report is limited to answering the question, “What do Maine people identify as the essentials of a public PK-12 education?” We answer this question in light of the study’s findings and in the further context of Maine itself. Maine is a primarily rural state, now several years past a global pandemic that shuttered schools while simultaneously opening outdoor and online classrooms for extended periods and forcing a reshuffling of priorities from the academic to the physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing of students and their families.

Maine schools are not the same as they were, and neither are the students and their parents. Public school enrollment stands at roughly 4% below pre-pandemic levels, and while chronic absenteeism has declined from its pandemic peak of 31% in 2021–22, it remained at 24% in 2023–24, still far above the pre-pandemic rate of 16% (Maine Department of Education, 2024a; Maine Department of Education, 2024b). The value proposition of in-person school became less clear for many families. One school administrator says his own child stays home "more than she should;" because her grades are still "good," due to all of her learning being designed to be done independently through Google Classroom; therefore, he feels he can't push her to attend.

Emergency pedagogical methods seem to have overstayed their welcome in some places, and the basic needs of young people—physical health, social-emotional skills, psychological wellbeing—remain top of mind for Mainers, educators, students, and community members alike. What Mainers say is most essential are the skills young people need in order to find purpose and take care of themselves, connect meaningfully with others, and work together to identify and solve pressing issues in their communities and beyond. With these skills in hand, Mainers imagine a promising future for each child and for our state.

The evolving national discourse has informed the Maine ED 2050 project from the start, from just after the pandemic's worst years to the current moment: Education and schooling must become both broader—in the inclusion of skill and capacity building beyond academics—and more narrowly focused—in identifying and hewing to the essentials. This study sought to identify what Maine people consider to be those essentials.

Participants' focus on "practical life skills" as broadly defining the essential indicates a general concern that schools should focus on developing skills and knowledge that are *used actively in life* rather than skills perceived to be useful only within courses or school itself. By naming these practical life skills as what is *most* essential, it becomes clear that *all* students educated in Maine's public schools then need to have the opportunity and support to develop them, inside or outside of the school walls.

A Foundation for All Maine Students to Gain the Essentials

As a foundational essential, young people need to feel safe and secure and be well nourished. They also need to experience care, belonging, and mattering. While not every group discussed these needs, those who did reminded us that without these foundational experiences, children suffer. And further, their learning suffers. Too many children across Maine do not have the foundation for a successful future, "through no fault of their own," as one participant put it. This has consequences for the quality of their current and future lives, the learning environment of their classmates, as well as the contributions they may make to their communities and the state as a whole.

Schools in particular may or may not be the appropriate responsible party for ensuring these needs are met for every child, but schools' success is predicated on these essential needs being met for every student. Educators are the frontline caregivers in many schools, working to

fill deep psychological and sometimes physical needs while staying on pace in the curriculum guide and preparing students for standardized tests, a situation that clearly is not sustainable, nor has it been particularly effective overall. Teacher recruitment and retention remain a challenge and, using test scores as a barometer, Maine's schools are too often not able to ensure students are mastering the basic academic skills.

But where these problems are worse is predictable. There is an unequal distribution of poverty and disabling substance use disorder across Maine's school districts, affecting not only children of struggling families, but those around them as well, negatively impacting whole classrooms right now and whole communities well into the future. Districts serving higher concentrations of students in poverty face compounding challenges—greater food insecurity, more unstable home lives, and more behavioral challenges in classrooms (Shankar et al., 2017)—and in Maine, the proportion of economically disadvantaged students in a district consistently predicts its overall test performance, with low-income Maine students' scores declining nearly twice as fast as those of their peers over the past decade (Maine Public Radio, 2020; Moravec, 2025). If all Maine students are to have the opportunity to gain the essential skills, capacities, and knowledge necessary for a healthy, meaningful, and productive adult life, we must address the question of how these foundational essentials for learning are met, mostly likely through community relationships as much as through structural collaboration across agencies.

Centering the Human Essentials Prepares Students for Any Future Pathway

Building the durable human skills, comprising social-emotional, interpersonal, and critical thinking skills is considered essential for every Maine student to succeed in life. We know these skills are precursors to capacities for academic learning and to capacities for a healthy and self-sufficient adult life. They are also strongly associated with developing and using one's own voice and acting confidently in the world, collaborating with others to solve community challenges.

A Maine education aligned with participants' priorities should therefore *center* these essential capacities rather than attempt to teach them through what students described as abstract lessons disconnected from their lives. Designing education to center the durable human skills in particular can have a tremendous impact because these capacities are best developed simultaneously, reinforcing each other as they strengthen, through practice in the messy world of human interaction. For example, individual agency, as a core SEL capacity, allows students to make use of the opportunities to grow, learn, develop meaningful aspirations, choose a path for their lives as well as take action with others to sustain their communities. Reaching those outcomes is a challenging, if not impossible, task to accomplish through a linear, predetermined course progression.

We heard from all participant groups that low motivation to attend and engage in learning is a key concern. We also heard that students can be motivated by close, respectful relationships with teachers; active learning opportunities: hands-on, experiential, project-based, or discussion-based; and content that feels relevant to their current interests or is tied to a future goal they have

chosen. Engagement is also clearly supported by teachers taking time to reteach, scaffold, or otherwise support students who may be just a lesson or two behind, before they lose interest or loosen their connection to a Learner identity. This means leaving strict pacing guides behind and instead incentivizing teachers to prioritize engagement. Addressing the motivation gap by truly prioritizing relationships and active, student-driven learning will simultaneously address the durable human skills Mainers say are essential.

Centering these skills does not substitute for ensuring that all students master the essential academic literacies they will need for future success. Rather, they are a necessary pre-condition for such learning. A Maine education can be arranged so that students learn their academics in the context of a rich, dynamic social and intellectual environment with opportunities for authentic voice and strong and responsive adults to guide all students in their personal development over the longer term. Using CASEL's transformative SEL model (CASEL, n.d.) can ensure the practical skills Mainers see as necessary for engaged citizenship are embedded in the learning activities occurring in such an environment.

Providing Specialized Opportunities without Limiting Access to Any Future Pathway

Students consistently asked for more individualized learning opportunities, ones that allow them to develop deeper expertise in areas of interest, and they also want fewer required classes in order to make room for these opportunities, including career and technical education courses. Specialization toward *career* interests after 10th grade is not uncommon in other countries and most participants seemed in favor, at least in part. Participants also agree that a strong *academic* core is essential (reading, writing, and mathematics in particular), with agreement circling around requiring content that *every* student needs, regardless of their postsecondary plans.

However, if a course is required for college admission, but otherwise is not seen as useful in life after high school, many participants would say it should not be a part of the essential academic core requirements. For example, participants across the state tend to see chemistry, for example, as not necessarily a part of the academic core because it is harder to see its applicability to everyday life post high school. However, they tend to see broadening experiences, gaining new perspectives and a fuller understanding of the world, as essential. "Essential" here begins to emerge not as "bare bones," but as rich, enabling, and impactful for all students. Eleventh and 12th grades may evolve to allow more focus on student interest, whether that is career or higher education focused, following a rigorous shared academic and practical life skills core in the first two years.

No matter their post-secondary pathways, *all* students need to have the practical life skills necessary for healthy, engaged adult life. Specialization must not preclude, for example, college-bound high school students from gaining skills in budgeting. AP Economics is not a substitute for personal finance. Likewise, specialization must not preclude students pursuing pathways outside of higher education from taking a rigorous academic foundation necessary for life. Writing a work order is not a substitute for learning to writing an email to one's congressperson.

To be clear: Individualized learning opportunities *cannot become a limitation* on students' access to the variety of life pathways. Every student *must have access* to high-quality, intellectually-challenging, relevant learning experiences, in every year of their education from PK through grade 12. Every high school student *must have access* to rigorous preparation for higher education. Access means *proper preparation* to choose and make use of those opportunities as much as having specific course listings. The challenge here is that, right now, this is not the case for all Maine students.

Many participants, especially students, asked for earlier access to CTE programming, as early as middle school for ongoing courses and elementary school for exploratory programs. Participants also show interest in prioritizing expanding CTE access in high school while also enabling more students to take both a college track and a CTE track of courses. A model like Massachusetts', CTE high schools with integrated, specialized academics, might be a direction Maine chooses in order to achieve both goals—earlier and deeper specialization without the sacrifice of higher-level academics. This type of school could be incentivized through the process of funding school building projects.

While CTE and preparation for careers in the trades is very popular among participants on the whole, consideration must be given to the timing of many of the focus groups—before it became clear that artificial intelligence will have a deep impact on the future of work, and sooner than we had anticipated. We are unlikely to have robots fixing our home plumbing anytime soon, but careers in the trades at the industry level may very well be impacted by artificial intelligence and robotics in the immediate and near future. Recent analysis confirms that the most crucial skills for success are now not specialized but broadly human, including interpersonal skills, adaptability, resilience, and creative thinking, all capacities that AI cannot readily replicate (Deloitte, 2026; WEF, 2025). Flexibility defines human beings as distinct from animals, and perhaps from AI.

Maine can respond to these new realities by supporting earlier specialization within a high school model that teaches students design thinking, creative problem solving, and cross-sector application of their emerging skill set. Schools must prepare students for maximum flexibility and adaptability while also fostering engagement by supporting students to identify and deepen their talents and interests. Students may benefit from a high school education that allows for greater specialization toward career or higher education than is currently in place in most districts; however, a commitment to the academic core being untracked fulfils participants' desire for strong community connections and skills for collaboration in careers and in civic spaces, where much of life happens in "mixed-ability" groups. **(**The XQ Institute provides policy and practice examples to support high school redesign using these principles).

Shared Responsibility for Maine Students' Education

Parents' responsibility used to include care, food and shelter as a minimum. However, we know that many students eat their only meals at school. Too many students do not have stable housing. Parents are increasingly unable to provide these essentials. Families are also struggling

to provide the SEL skills, basic preliteracy and pre-numeracy skills, and adulting skills once expected to be taught through everyday life at home and in faith communities. Stressed homes and parents, fractured family lives, low parental engagement, all indicate a need for shared responsibility, at least until families are once again generally stable. Of course, not every district experiences these challenges to the same degree; however, we heard these themes across focus group conversations in each setting.

Schools are, indeed, taking on more of the burden to provide nutrition, mental health care, and emotional support, more than many feel they can handle sustainably, especially while also prioritizing improving test scores. Generally, participants saw this as both problematic and necessary in the absence of another plan; the basics need to be met so students can access their full education. Is it school's responsibility to *provide the foundation* for schooling, or only the academic schooling? This question is to be wrestled with and addressed in a consistent way across the state. Appropriate resources need to be steered toward the right providers.

Can the greater local community be asked to share in the responsibility for these education essentials, "adulting" skills as much as mindsets for health living and even specialized content? This question seems especially salient as some communities are striving to keep more young people from leaving and are necessarily seeking strategies for fostering closer connections between students and place. Some groups discussed school as one place among many that serve to educate youth, and some shared a vision for schools as hubs for connecting students with internships, mentors, jobs, etc., much like Iowa BIG[1], where students spend half the day in traditional high school classes and the other working on projects with community partners. Standards met are tracked and gaps filled with teachers as needed. Shifting every Maine high school to this model would require a strong and perhaps initially burdensome commitment from each community to provide enough adults to mentor every high school student. However, there is very strong support from participants across Maine for this model.

But what happens when essentials are understood and implemented differently in different regions of Maine? Vastly different educational experiences and therefore outcomes. Unless we make the essentials a part of a *Maine* education, they will not be possible for all students. Some will be left behind, individuals *and* regions, and the state as whole as a result. The state is responsible for ensuring access, but this is less meaningful unless access *to what* is defined. The Maine Learning Results alone have not resulted in Maine's students consistently being prepared for post-secondary life, according to employers as well as students, parents, and community members. The current Life and Career Ready standards, as they are written, are very nearly what this report describes. However, few students report feeling prepared, with local adults from across the state concurring. Some students are indeed receiving instruction on these

[1] https://xqsuperschool.org/where-we-work/iowa-big/

topics, but either the length or type of instruction is not adequate. And, indeed, in some areas, the opposite is true.

A shift from total district responsibility toward shared or regional capacity could help. Using what is broadly understood to be needed across the state and not leaving to chance or convenience what students experience, local units and the state can partner to share responsibility for Maine students receiving the essential education Mainers envision. Maine law already allows multiple pathways for students and leaves much implementation to local units. However, local control can undermine instructional quality when districts are too small to build strong curriculum, coaching, and assessment systems on their own or provide opportunities outside of the school itself. The state could incentivize regional service center models for supporting curriculum adoption, teacher development, and academic intervention in certain subjects or grade bands, especially where districts are small. Regional hubs could also provide scaffolding to schools and districts for transformative shifts toward centering the new practical skills and experiences. These supports could lighten a burden felt at the local level, providing direct support to teachers in alignment with emerging best practices and empowering educators to realize the relationship-based, hands-on, developmentally appropriate and relevant education they envision.

A Framework for Action toward the Essentials

A fuller examination of a more targeted range of potential policy directions will be made in the report following the Maine Citizens' Assembly on Education Priorities in FY2027. For now, we share an organized list of specific actions that can be taken in support of the identified educational essentials from this study, based on the following criteria:

1. Aligned with AASA's The Public Education Promise,
2. Likely to have statewide positive outcomes,
3. Strategic and long-term focused, and
4. Fiscally aware.

The School Superintendent Association, AASA, recently created The Public Education Promise to articulate their vision of the goals for public education and a framework of priorities for achieving those goals. And while the numbered principles of The Public Education Promise don't align directly with the major themes of Maine ED 2050, their substance and implications are highly similar. Note that who is responsible, or the level at which the action should be taken, is not prescribed here. That question of responsibility was raised, but not answered within this study.

We preface the framework with a quote from The Public Education Promise (AASA, n.d.) because of the strength and clarity with which is shares the essence of much of the national discourse on schooling as well as what study participants articulated here in Maine:

The Public Education Promise is our commitment to providing every child in every community with a highly effective education that prepares them for college, career, and real life in the real world. It is a recognition that preparing America's public school students to become active, contributing citizens goes beyond academic achievement and includes learning essential skills like critical thinking, curiosity, collaboration, problem-solving, and resilience.

For this to be achievable, the people serving on the frontlines of learning must be supported and empowered to lead. In America's highly decentralized public education system, we believe teachers, principals, counselors, coaches, and district leaders—the practitioners—are the on-the-ground experts best positioned to initiate and effect the changes necessary to improve learning experiences and outcomes for every student. However, we cannot expect learning experiences to be powerful and impactful if we add more and more to teachers' plates on a given day. We need to focus on the skills that are integral for a student to be successful and permit teachers to prioritize the skills and concepts students require to be successful.

<u>PRINCIPLE 1: Prioritize Student-Centered Learning</u>

- Address students' safety, security, and nourishment needs first.
- Center meaningful student-teacher relationships throughout schools and in classrooms.
- Employ a streamlined set of research-backed, developmentally appropriate standards for the essential practical life skills.
- Engage students in courses designed to use active learning modalities.
- Integrate mechanisms for regular and authentic student voice at the school, district, and state levels to ensure schooling is relevant and responsive to student needs.

<u>PRINCIPLE 2: The New Basics: Real Skills for Real Life</u>

- Center human durable skills.
    - Social-emotional skills: Self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making.
    - Critical thinking skills.
- Prioritize skills for healthy, independent lives of purpose and meaning.
    - Understanding of self in context of human development: talents, interests, aspirations.

    - Working understanding of ways to meet nutritional, exercise, and bodily needs; maintain mental health and wellbeing; and develop healthy personal and professional relationships.
    - Mastery of rudimentary cooking, housekeeping, home and auto repairs.
    - Mastery of basic personal banking, budgeting, and tax filing.
    - Working understanding of investments, including home ownership.
- Prioritize core academic foundations directly applicable to adult life.
    - Mastery of mathematics through at least Algebra 1.
    - Mastery of English language in written and spoken form and its appropriate use in a variety of contexts.
    - Working understanding of the safe, ethical, and productive use of digital technologies, including AI.
    - Understanding of historical events that inform current events and permit substantive participation in self-governance.
- Expose students early and often to the myriad ways adults work in the world.

<u>PRINCIPLE 3: Attract, Hire, Retain, and Reward the Best People</u>

- Center teachers' wellbeing needs alongside students'.
- Extend responsibility beyond schools for students' foundational needs.
- Prepare teachers to center durable human skills while teaching academic and other life skills in this context.
- Require teachers to be experts in human development, empower teachers to use time and resources to meet the full spectrum of essentials, and compensate them accordingly.
- Build school, district, and regional infrastructure to actively support teacher success.

<u>PRINCIPLE 4: Build Highly Engaged Family, Community, and Business Partnerships</u>

- Work with community, regional and state-level partners to support children and families in gaining safety, security, and nourishment.
- Recognize learning happens everywhere. Incentivize and support local flexibility in meeting standards outside traditional classrooms.
- Increase the porosity of the boundaries between classroom and the greater community. Ask community organizations and businesses where they can support

students in developing the essentials, inside and outside the school building and develop long-term partnerships.

PRINCIPLE 5: Measure What Matters

- Monitor students' sense of safety and security and access to adequate nutrition and prioritize action to address shortfalls.
- Develop robust qualitative and quantitative measurement methods that transparently demonstrate authentic student achievement using practical life skills to parents and the community.
- Measure students' progress in using the durable human skills first and address gaps as aggressively as if they were academic skills.
- Measure students' progress in attaining the full set of practical life skills.
- Incentivize and support use of new methods to track of standards met outside of traditional classrooms
- Communicate measurement strategy and share results frequently to build trust with parents and the greater community.

Next Steps

Maine would likely benefit from creating a nimble state-level system to respond quickly and effectively beyond our current model. The pace of change is not slowing and the changes themselves are growing more complex, indicating a need for an education system that operates in rapid iterative cycles of sensing need and deploying resources, while remaining grounded in a clarity of a long-term vision for education toward a flourishing state. To transition to such a system will require commitment of time and resources that may not be readily available. However, not doing so risks a decline in Maine's capacity to educate effectively. These are questions a new administration and future legislative bodies may decide to consider.

This report is based on a larger research project, Maine Education 2050, which surfaced broader findings about the future of education in Maine. Further analyses for policymakers could be done on specific questions of importance once this report has been digested. Separately, more data could be collected from employers. Pilot focus groups were held with industry and business leaders in the projects' first year, but limited resources focused our work on students, teachers, and community members in this phase of the project. We could return to expand on that pilot to learn more about the similarities and differences between major Maine industries in what skills they seek in new employes and the relationship between what students, educators, and communities envision and what employers see they need.

This report and the associated Maine School Stories Portal will be key components of the Maine Citizens' Assembly on Education Priorities in Summer 2026. MEPRI will evaluate the assembly process and its effectiveness in providing policymakers with actionable information

and citizens with a venue for informed deliberation and influence. MEPRI will also report on the priorities identified by the assembly's delegates as well as the contributions of the advocacy and community organizations that participated in providing learning support to the delegates and feedback on draft policy proposals as a part of the assembly process. We hope to provide legislators, the incoming administration, and school boards with a robust understanding of where common ground can be found in education policy as well as where there are deep divides, either by political ideology or geography or other factors.

References

AASA The School Superintendents Association. (2023). *The public education promise.* https://www.aasa.org/the-public-education-promise

AASA The School Superintendents Association. (n.d.). *The public education promise.* https://www.aasa.org/docs/default-source/resources/reports/the-public-education-promise-action-framework.pdf

America Succeeds & Lightcast. (2021). *The high demand for durable skills*. https://lightcast.io/resources/blog/new-research-with-america-succeeds-reveals-the-high-demand-for-durable-skills

America Succeeds. (2024). *Defining durable skills.* https://americasucceeds.org/defining-durable-skills

America Succeeds & Lightcast. (2025). *Durable by design: An update on the high demand for durable skills.* https://americasucceeds.org/durable-by-design-why-skills-for-the-future-start-now

Belfield, C. R., Bowden, A. B., Klapp, A., Levin, H., Shand, R., & Zander, S. (2015). *The economic value of social and emotional learning.* Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L. H., Ha, C., Kirk, M., Wood, M., Sehgal, K., Zieher, A. K., Eveleigh, A., McCarthy, M., Funaro, M., Ponnock, A., Chow, J. C., & Durlak, J. (2023). The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. *Child Development, 94(*5), 1181–1204. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13968

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). *CASEL's SEL framework: What are the core competence areas and where are they promoted?* https://casel.org/casel-sel-framework-11-2020/?view=1

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *Transformative SEL.* https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/how-does-sel-support-educational-equity-and-excellence/transformative-sel/

Darolia, R., & Owens, S., & Tyler, J. (2022, September). The opioid crisis and educational performance. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 703*(1), 188-233.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success.* Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/educating-whole-child-report

Deloitte. (2026, January 14). *Human capabilities are at the heart of high-performing teams.* https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/about/press-room/high-performing-teams.html

Deming, David J. (2017, November). *The growing importance of social skills in the labor market.* The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132(*4), 1593–1640. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx022

Doss, C. J., Bozick, R., Schwartz, H. L., & Diliberti, M. K. (2026). *More students use AI for homework, and more believe it harms critical thinking: Selected findings from the American Youth Panel.* RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA4742-1.html

Drescher, J., Steyer, L., Townley-Flores, C., & Humphreys, K. (2022). Has the opioid crisis affected student Learning? A national analysis of growth rates. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 703*(1), 234-261.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82(*1), 405–432. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

Fullan, M. (2016). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Greenberg, M. T. (2023). *Evidence for social and emotional learning in schools.* Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/928.269

Jaumotte, F., Kim, J., Koll, D., Li, E., Li, L., Melina, G., Song, A., & Mendes Tavares, M. (2026). *Bridging skill gaps for the future: New jobs creation in the AI age.* (Staff Discussion Note SDN/2026/001). International Monetary Fund. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798229028196.006

John T. Gorman Foundation. (2025, March 4). *Building a 'community of prevention' in Midcoast Maine.* https://www.jtgfoundation.org/2025/03/building-a-community-of-prevention-in-midcoast-maine/

UNESCO. (2026, March 24). *What you need to know about literacy.* https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know#:~:text=Acquiring%20literacy%20is%20not%20a,and%20learning%20through%20digital%20technology.

McLure, F. I., & Aldridge, J. M. (2023). Sustaining reform implementation: A systematic literature review. *School Leadership & Management, 43*(1), 70–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2023.2171012

Maine Department of Education. (n.d.). *Content standards.* https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/content

Maine Department of Education. (2024a). *Student enrollment data.* https://www.maine.gov/doe/data-warehouse/reporting/enrollment

Maine Department of Education. (2024b). *Maine Engagement and Attendance Center.* https://www.maine.gov/doe/meac

Maine Department of Education. (2026, April 3). *Chapter 132 – LearningrResults: Parameters for essential instruction* (05-071 Ch. 132). https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov.doe/files/inline-files/Content%20%26%20Standards%20-%20Rule%20Chapter%20132%20Maine%20Learning%20Results%20-%204.3.2026.pdf

Maine Public Radio. (2020, February 24). *Maine's low-income students have fallen further behind their peers over the past four years.* https://www.mainepublic.org/maine/2020-02-24/maines-low-income-students-have-fallen-further-behind-their-peers-over-the-past-4-years

Ministry of Education and Culture. (2026). *Basic education 2045: For life. A vision for Finnish comprehensive schools.* Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland. https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/b13f3ae6-e2ab-48f8-8a22-921aa177b4f2/content

Moravec, K. (2025, October 26). These Maine students are sinking to the bottom. *The Maine Monitor*. https://themainemonitor.org/these-students-are-sinking-to-the-bottom/

Muro, M., Maxim, R., & Whiton, J. (2024). *Generative AI, the American worker, and the future of work.* Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/generative-ai-the-american-worker-and-the-future-of-work/

National Assessment Governing Board. (2025). *Nation's report card shows declines in 8th-grade science and 12th-grade math and reading.* https://www.nagb.gov/news-and-events/news-releases/2025/declines-in-8th-grade-science-and-12th-grade-math-and-reading.html

National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Program for the international assessment of adult competencies (PIAAC): U.S. data.* U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/

OECD. (2019). *OECD Future of education and skills 2030: OECD learning compass 2030.* https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/education-2040/1-1-learning-compass/OECD_Learning_Compass_2030_Concept_Note_Series.pdf#page=6.17

Office of the State Economist. (2023, June). *Maine population outlook 2020 to 2030*. Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services. https://www.maine.gov/dafs/economist/sites/maine.gov.dafs.economist/files/inline-files/Maine%20Population%20Outlook%20to%202030_0.pdf

Pew Research Center. (2026, February 24). *How teens use and view AI.* https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2026/02/24/how-teens-use-and-view-ai/

Scheibel, G., Wilkenson, S., Fairman, Janet C., Tariq, Abdur Rehman. (2025). *Maine K-12 educator and administrator experiences managing challenging behavior in schools.* Maine Education Policy Research Institute, University of Maine.

Southern Regional Education Board. (2023). *The skills employers demand: An analysis of the research.* https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/success_skills_research.pdf

Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-

analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development, 88*(4), 1156–1171. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864

Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform.* Harvard University Press.

World Economic Forum. (2025). *The future of jobs report 2025*. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

APPENDIX A: Maine Statute

The following sections of Maine statute provide relevant background information for the implications section of this report.

The first section below, "Title 20-A, Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 8: Public school innovation" details the legislature's desire to support educator professionalism by promoting educators' role in evolving schools as well as its vision for ongoing educational R&D. It may offer the enabling legislation for university-district partnership to found one or more lab schools to advance research into pressing issues and share promising solutions.

The second section below, "Title 20, Part 2, Chapter 111, Section 1221: Teaching of Morality and Virtue," describes the role of educator as far more than academic instructor. The educator is specifically asked to make a sincere effort to support the character development of their students toward each student's own happiness but also for the good of the community, through active citizenship. This section was not repealed as all other sections of Title 20 were, when Title 20-A was approved.

The third section below, "Title 20-A, Part 3, Chapter 222, Section 6208: Legislative Intent," describes the legislature's intent behind their initiation of the Maine Learning Results and their belief that it was "through a shared sense of accountability and a cooperative spirit" among all stakeholders that the highest standards for education could be achieved. It also specifically identifies "[t]he ultimate goal and intent of the Legislature is to ensure that the State's schools will enable today's students to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary education, career and citizenship." This section was last updated in 1995.

The fourth and final section below, "Title 20-A, Part 3, Chapter 222, Section 6209: System of Learning Results Established," immediately follows the third section described above, is a listing of the "parameters for essential instruction and graduation requirements," which all students must have access to learn within.

Title 20-A, Part 1, Chapter 1, Section 8: Public school innovation

In order to support a culture of research and development and elevate the professionalism of the State's education practitioners, the commissioner shall encourage school administrative units to pursue continuous improvement processes to identify opportunities to innovate school structures and policies as a means of more effectively meeting the learning needs and improving the academic performance of all students. The public and private postsecondary institutions of higher education in the State are urged to partner with the department, the state board and school administrative units to provide appropriate and timely professional development programs and other support services to educators employed in public schools engaged in school innovation efforts. [PL 2021, c. 571, §1 (AMD).]

1. School innovation. For the purposes of this section, the term "school innovation" means the process by which schools and communities use pilot programs and make significant changes in

the existing school structure, including the policies, roles, relationships, pathways and schedules that influence teaching and learning in the school. School innovation recognizes the critical educational role of technology and integrates technology and technological systems in the classroom, in school governance and in school record keeping. School innovation is based on:

A. The development of comprehensive educational goals establishing community expectations for what all students should know, the skills they should possess, the attitude toward work and learning they should hold upon completing school and the role of the school in the community; [PL 1991, c. 407, §1 (NEW).]

B. A formal appraisal of the basic structures that govern operation of the school; and [PL 1991, c. 407, §1 (NEW).]

C. A commitment to revise the basic school structure to achieve the comprehensive educational goals. [PL 1991, c. 407, §1 (NEW).]

School innovation, which is most effectively carried out at the local level, depends on community and educator involvement and approval and student participation. School innovation includes understanding of the various roles of stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, administrators, support staff, postsecondary education institutions and officials and various segments of the community. It focuses on understanding and defining the root cause of challenges and innovates and tests solutions. School innovation may include a significantly broadened role for schools and school administrative units that engage in education research and development. The commissioner may designate a school administrative unit that engages in education research and development as a demonstration site. [PL 2021, c. 571, §1 (AMD).]

Title 20, Part 2, Chapter 111, Section 1221: Teaching of Morality and Virtue:

Instructors of youth in public or private institutions shall use their best endeavors to impress on the minds of the children and youth committed to their care and instruction the principles of morality and justice and a sacred regard for truth; love of country, humanity and a universal benevolence; the great principles of humanity as illustrated by kindness to birds and animals and regard for all factors which contribute to the well-being of man; industry and frugality; chastity, moderation and temperance; and all other virtues which ornament human society; and to lead those under their care, as their ages and capacities admit, into a particular understanding of the tendency of such virtues to preserve and perfect a republican constitution, secure the blessings of liberty and to promote their future happiness.

Title 20-A, Part 3, Chapter 222, Section 6208: Legislative Intent:

The Legislature finds that because all children can learn at significantly higher levels, it is essential that the Legislature, the State Board of Education, the Department of Education, school

administrative units, educators and parents provide children with schools that reflect high expectations and create conditions where these expectations can be met. Through a shared sense of accountability and a cooperative spirit among State Government, school administrative units, educators, parents, business persons, and the community, school administrative units and educators can develop and teach to high standards that will enable students to become productive and fulfilled members of society. The Legislature further finds that the system of learning results set forth in section 6209 and in department rules implementing that section and other curricular requirements will serve as a foundation for education reform, will promote assessment of student learning, will reinforce accountability and will encourage equity. The Legislature, therefore, encourages the State Board of Education, the Department of Education and school administrative units to employ a high degree of creativity in developing content standards and performance indicators and to explore a wide range of programs and options so that the standards adopted will reflect the highest possible expectations and assessments will be of the highest possible quality. The ultimate goal and intent of the Legislature is to ensure that the State's schools will enable today's students to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary education, career and citizenship. [PL 2007, c. 259, §4 (AMD).] Last changed 1995

Title 20-A, Part 3, Chapter 222, Section 6209: System of Learning Results Established:

2. Parameters for essential instruction and graduation requirements. Each school subject to the provisions of this section shall ensure sufficient opportunity and capacity through multiple pathways for all students to study in the areas of:

A. Life and career readiness; [PL 2021, c. 190, §6 (RPR).]

B. English language arts; [PL 1995, c. 649, §1 (NEW).]

C. World languages; [PL 2007, c. 259, §5 (AMD).]

D. Health, physical education and wellness; [PL 2007, c. 259, §5 (AMD).]

E. Mathematics; [PL 1995, c. 649, §1 (NEW).]

F. Science and technology; [PL 1995, c. 649, §1 (NEW).]

G. Social studies; and [PL 1995, c. 649, §1 (NEW).]

H. Visual and performing arts. [PL 1995, c. 649, §1 (NEW).]

[PL 2021, c. 190, §6 (AMD).]

APPENDIX B: Methods

Use of Artificial Intelligence

AI evolved dramatically from the beginning of the project's analysis phase in 2023 to the present moment. Large LLMs existed in 2023, but they were nowhere near as sophisticated as they are today. Because of this, our use of AI was very different in the initial stages—it was more exploratory. We asked, "How can AI help us organize this data?" and our team collaborated over the course of a year with MIT's Center for Constructive Communication on a new AI tool within Cortico for finding themes across our set of conversations while ensuring that the theming was guided by our own deep knowledge of the data. In other words, we were teaching the AI how to understand our data so that it could help us later, when we had hundreds more conversations to analyze. That work resulted in a set of useful themes and also a decision not to use the AI tool for coding. It was not sophisticated enough to understand nuance at the level of an individual statement. In fact, we never felt it could replace our feeling for the meaning of participants' words. Later, in spring 2026, when LLMs had evolved substantially, we used Claude to explore the relationship between different demographic groups and the themes and codes we had assigned to over 15,000 of statements. We were quickly able to assess the validity of patterns we thought might be present, asking the AI if specific examples from our coded data existed to back up our proposed claims.

It is important to note that the AI tool never reached a depth of understanding that rivaled ours, which meant that we used it for catching a pattern across thousands of statements rather than for coding individual statements. Nothing can replace the human relationship to story; we, as human beings who held most of the focus group conversations, knew the data in a way that an AI never would. We cared about it; we had empathy for the human beings who shared their stories with us, and we felt motivated to analyze and synthesize learnings to serve the participants who joined us in the research.

Data collection

Here we share additional information on our strategies for reaching balanced representation across all Maine counties.

To be noted is the large number of participants relative to population size in two counties: Aroostook and Kennebec. These counties had superintendents in certain districts who chose to engage more deeply, arranging for students, educators, parents, and community members to participate, and using the findings to inform a strategic planning process. For this portion of the larger project, this study designed for the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee and conducted in FY2026, we sought to balance these larger numbers of participants from Aroostook and Kennebec Counties by focusing participant recruitment efforts in other counties.

To target underrepresented areas and participant types, we used rations of census population numbers and counts of existing focus groups to identify particularly large gaps, where we then made the strongest outreach efforts. We held as many focus group conversations as was possible within the limits of the study funding and timeline, adding 46 new focus group conversations. While this imbalance could be problematic for a statewide study, our analysis did not find significant differences between counties in what participants saw as essential. There were variations in the particulars but not in the overarching themes.

Protocols

Here we share the lists of questions that we used to prompt discussion among participants. While questions for each of the three groups (youth, educator, and community member) are sometimes similar, they are distinct from each other.

Educator conversation questions

1. Please share your first name, the county and town you live in, your profession and a value that is important to you and how it might be related to what you hope for youth as they experience their education?
2. What does it mean to you to have a good life? Do you perceive your students having a similar idea of what a good life is?
3. What do you see as being the greatest strength of the young people you teach, in general? Would you have answered this question differently ten years ago? Can you share a story to illustrate this?
4. Considering that, how do you see your students impacting the culture, civil society, and economy of Maine in the decades to come?
5. What are the most important experiences, skills, and capacities for your students to gain before adulthood in order for them to thrive as people and as citizens and succeed economically in the future Maine?
6. Do teaching and schooling need to respond or evolve to meet students in these newer generations or to play a part in providing the experiences, skills, and capacities you mentioned? If yes, what might that look like? Where do you see examples of this happening already?
7. Now thinking more broadly, do you see a set of timeless skills or human capacities that are or will be essential in the future that we should be teaching now?
8. What's one thing you heard today that you'd like state policy makers and district leaders/school boards to hear?

Youth conversation questions

1. Please share just your first name, the county and town you live in, and a specific example of a time when you felt you mattered to your community.
2. What does it mean to you to have a good life? Do you think that the adults around you see it similarly?
3. Can you share a picture of where you'll be in ten years? Will you be living in your town? In Maine? Why?
4. How do you want to contribute to your community? How does work or career fit in with that?
5. Do you see being civically engaged as mattering to you?
6. What experiences, skills, or capacities do you think you'll need to thrive and succeed in your future? Why?
7. What are the obstacles to you achieving your dreams?
8. What role does school play in preparing you for the future you'd like to have?
9. What might school, or preparation for adult life, look like if it really fit your needs and your life — dream big, the sky's the limit!
10. What's one thing you heard today that you'd want adults in charge of making the rules about schools to know?

Community Conversation Questions

1. Please share your first name, the county and town you live in, your profession and just a few words about what you feel makes a thriving, resilient community.
2. How have you experienced your community being a good place to live and how has this changed over your time living there? How do you see this changing over the next few decades?
3. Can you create a picture for us of what a good citizen in your community will be like or will do, one who helps your community be its best, in the coming decades?
4. What do you see as some of the most important experiences, skills, and capacities for youth to gain before adulthood in order for them to thrive and succeed in your community over the next few decades?
5. Where have you seen examples of good ways for those experiences, skills and capacities to be gained?
6. Does schooling need to respond or evolve to help your community thrive in the coming decades, to play a part in providing the experiences, skills, and capacities you mentioned above? If yes, do you see seeds for this shift?
7. What is the highest value of preK-12 education to your community?

8. What's one thing you heard today that you'd like state-level policy makers and district leaders to hear?

Data Analysis

Here we describe our data analysis process in more detail than most readers would appreciate.

We used the Cortico platform for our analysis. Each focus group conversation was recorded and uploaded to the platform, which produced a written transcript while also preserving audio. Each transcript was then reviewed by at least one research team member.

The first stage of the analysis process led to the identification of themes within the conversations of each participant group. This was done using both deductive and inductive methods, first labeling each participant statement according to question that prompted the response, and, second, labeling each statement descriptively, creating codes such as "takes initiative," "risk taking," and "informed" for the question: "What qualities does a good community member have?" As new conversations were held, we added descriptive codes, consolidating similar codes, adding new ones, and deleting codes for those few codes that were not used repeatedly. This coding and analysis process occurred starting in fall 2022 and continued through fall of 2024. During this time, participants were invited to the Cortico platform to review their transcript to make highlights and annotations, which guided our understanding of the data, grounding it in participants' own sensemaking.

The second stage of the analysis process led to themes across the full dataset, across the three participant groups. This stage began approximately halfway through the data collection phase in August 2024. Working with scientists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Constructive Communication, we used artificial intelligence (AI) and a months-long iterative process to explore and ultimately identify cross-cutting conceptual themes from all three participant groups, using the codes from the first phase as descriptive of the dataset as a whole. Subthemes were identified using the same process. and, different from the major themes which stayed consistent, subthemes changed over time.

The third stage of analysis began in February 2025 and ended in March 2026. The major themes from the second phase did not change, but subthemes with fewer than 100 associated statements were deleted as were those that did not continue to be true cross-cutting themes as our data set more than doubled over time.

The overarching step-by-step analysis once themes had been established entailed:

1. Demographics: We identified each statement by participant type (youth, educator, community member) and the speaker's county of residence, or at times the county of their school, whichever they chose.

2. Structural Coding: We coded each substantive and unique participant statement by the question that prompted it.
3. Highlighting: Participants were invited to the Cortico platform to highlight and annotate their own transcript, adding new information and context. Few participants chose to do this extra step.
4. Tagging: We assigned each statement to one or more conceptual themes and subthemes.
5. Pattern Finding: The platform tallied numbers of participant statements tagged with each theme and subtheme. This gave us a rough idea of an emerging hierarchy among themes. We used the filter functions to explore themes by geography or participant type (youth, educator, community member), reviewing individual statements in groups to gain a better understanding of the breadth of specific themes.

Our validation strategies included ongoing discussion among the first three authors of the subtheme definitions and our emerging understanding across themes, reviewing individual coded statements within each subtheme until saturation was reached and writing summary memos to capture the fullness of each subtheme, discussing our written thematic memos summarizing findings.

After we wrote the final thematic memos, we employed Claude (an AI tool) to assist us in our investigation of patterns in the data geographically across Maine counties, as well as within and across the three categories of participant groups. Claude used our thematic memos and the deidentified data, each statement being identified by participant type and county, to both suggest patterns for our further investigation and also assess the validity of patterns we believed might be present. A dataset of approximately 15,000 statements from three different participant groups would have required an untenable commitment of time to surface and test for such patterns without the use of AI. Because of our deep familiarity with the data at this point in the project, we recognized which patterns were strong and which were weak, and we explored those stronger patterns in the data manually.