

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

ESSENTIALS OF A MAINE EDUCATION

Select Findings from Phase One of Maine Education 2050

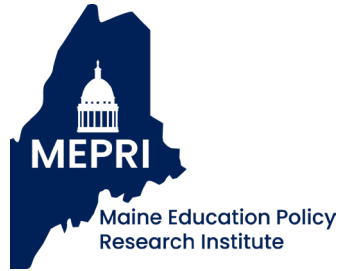
Jennifer S. Chace
Jane M. Endres
Janet C. Fairman
Sharon L. Gerrish



Maine Education Policy
Research Institute



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Essentials of a Maine Education

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.¹ 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.¹

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.”²

1 | 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-learningcompass/OECD_Learning_Compass_2030_Concept_Note_Series.pdf#page=6.17

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

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.³

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.⁴ Recent investments such as these acknowledge the need for what, at least, could be called a “renovation” of our education system.

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

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



As a predominantly rural state with an aging and naturally declining population⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

5 | 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/inlinefiles/Maine%20Population%20Outlook%20to%202030_0.pdf

6 | 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.

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.”⁷ Recent MEPRI research has highlighted the increased prevalence of negative and sometimes dangerous behavior of Maine students and the impact on classrooms.⁸ 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

7 | 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-inmidcoast-maine/>

8 | 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.



“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 2030⁹ 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.

9 | 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-learningcompass/OECD_Learning_Compass_2030_Concept_Note_Series.pdf#page=6.17





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.

Finland’s Basic Education 2045: For Life

Likewise, Finland’s recently revised vision for its comprehensive education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2026),¹⁰ 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).

10 | 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>

“[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.”¹¹ 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.

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

The framework¹² 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.

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



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."¹³ The full set of Maine Learning Results is too extensive to include here.

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

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.¹⁴ 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;¹⁵ a 2025 update confirmed the trend has grown stronger, with 76% of all job postings now requiring at least one durable skill.¹⁶ The evidence base for social-emotional

14 | 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>

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

16 | 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-futurestart-now>

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,¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹

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).²² For students affected by family disruption, trauma, substance use disorder, or community instability, whole-child approaches may be necessary rather than merely beneficial.

17 | 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>

18 | 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 schoolbased universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>

19 | 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>

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

21 | 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.

22 | 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>

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 pandemic²³ 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.²⁴

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.

23 | 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/newsreleases/2025/declines-in-8th-grade-science-and-12th-grade-math-and-reading.html>

24 | 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/>



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 Cuban²⁵ 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.²⁶ And effective systemic reform requires

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

26 | 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>

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).²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ The International Monetary Fund concludes that students need cognitive, creative, and technical skills that complement AI rather than compete with it.³¹

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.

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

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

29 | 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/>

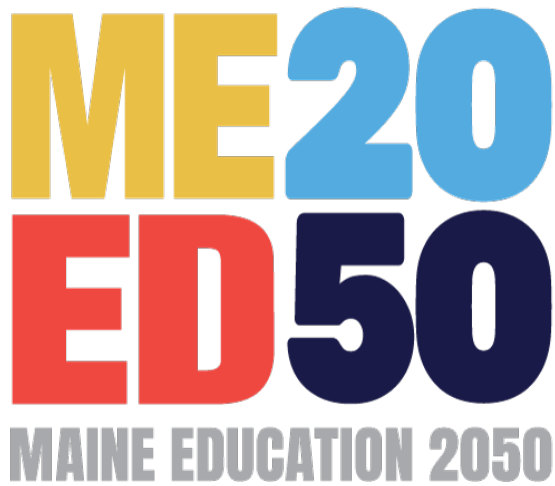
30 | Doss, C. J., Bozick, R., Schwartz, H. L., & Diliberati, M. K. (2026). *More students use AI for homework, and more believe it harms critical thinking: Selected findings from the American Youth Panel*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA4742-1.html

31 | 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>



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Over 1,000 Mainers from across all sixteen counties have come together to discuss values, how our communities have changed and where we hope they will go, the essential skills and capacities youth need to co-create a thriving future Maine, and how schooling needs to evolve in response. Now you can hear their stories and explore insights from the project through the Maine School Stories Portal. [Take a tour.](#)

