

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

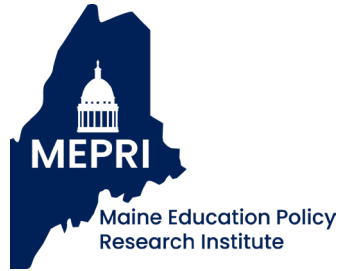
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Essentials of a Maine Education

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 precondition 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.



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.

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. 11th 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

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 crosssector 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 fulfills 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 BIG¹, where students spend half the day in traditional high school classes and the other working on projects with community partners.

1. <https://xqsuperschool.org/where-we-work/iowa-big/>



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 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 it 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, problemsolving, 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.

PRINCIPLE 1: Prioritize Student-Centered Learning

- 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.

PRINCIPLE 2: The New Basics: Real Skills for Real Life

- 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.

PRINCIPLE 3: Attract, Hire, Retain, and Reward the Best People

- 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.

PRINCIPLE 4: Build Highly Engaged Family, Community, and Business Partnerships

- 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

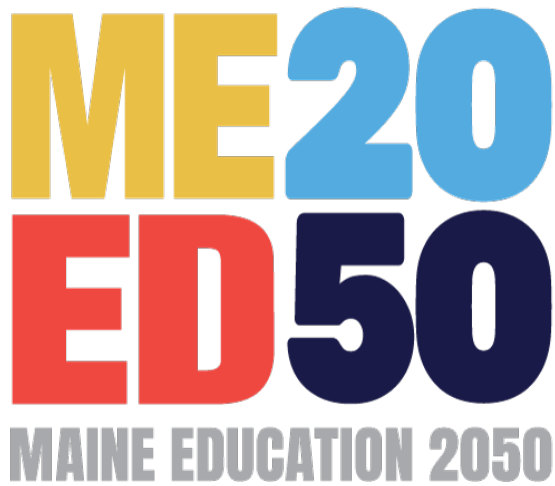
been digested. Separately, more data could be collected from employers. Pilot focus groups were held with industry and business leaders in the projects' first year, but limited resources focused our work on students, teachers, and community members in this phase of the project. We could return to expand on that pilot to learn more about the similarities and differences between major Maine industries in what skills they seek in new employees 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.



READ THE FULL REPORT HERE.



MAINE SCHOOL STORIES PORTAL

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.](#)

