

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

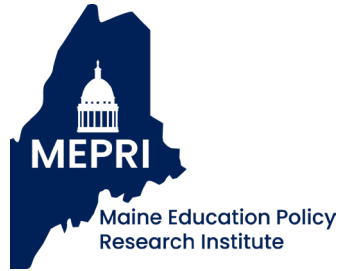
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Essentials of a Maine Education

# 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.”

## Motivation and Engagement *cont.*

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.*

## Motivation and Engagement *cont.*

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."



## Motivation and Engagement cont.



**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."



## Home Instability and Insecurity *cont.*

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.*



## Home Instability and Insecurity *cont.*

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.

## Home Instability and Insecurity *cont.*

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 Scarcity *cont.*

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:

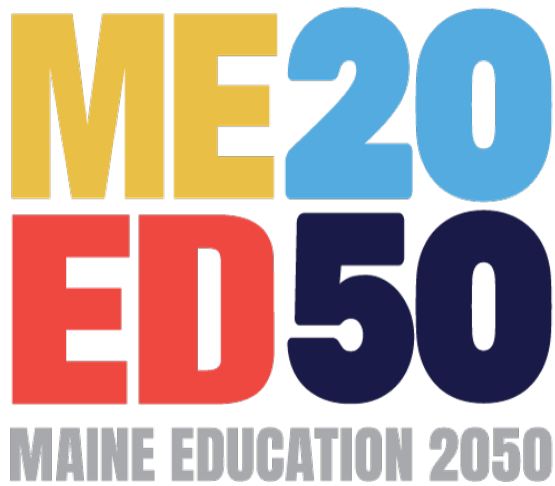
*I do theater in Fort Kent every single, like, almost every day. And it’s 30 minutes there, 30 minutes back. That is the only program we have in the Valley...If we had this school, not only would we have different opportunities for classes to get the experience we need for, like, our jobs, we could see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



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# MAINE SCHOOL STORIES PORTAL

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