

October 6, 2020

Quality Public Education for All Maine Children

The most important investment the state can make in its future is an investment in education. That education must be provided by highly trained effective teachers and be designed to help students succeed once they leave our public schools.

Our belief in equal opportunity to learn is supported by the way we fund public education in Maine and through the learning standards in place for all students. Constant attention to this goal drives our work and influences our positions on proposed legislation.

Some recent examples include:

- Adoption of a standards-based learning system where all students have the opportunity to gain and demonstrate knowledge in key content areas, from reading to math to science and art.
- Support for expanded public pre-kindergarten programs that research shows are absolutely tied to greater achievement through high school and beyond.
- Increased state funding for Career and Technical Education based on actual program costs not past expenditures to allow more students to participate in work-related training.
- Recognition that poverty at home does affect a student's ability to learn at school, with additional funding passed in the biennial budget for instructional support and after-school programs.
- Rethinking the way we deliver special education services to make better use of all staff and intervene earlier when students are struggling.

Creating and supporting an environment where all children can learn also requires schools to do more than ever before. We not only need to feed students' minds and bodies, but in partnership with our communities support them when it comes to their overall physical, social and mental health.

As the state's public school leaders, we want to share our vision on how to make sure all children are well served and use our voice to raise issues that need to be addressed. This overview is designed to stimulate discussion and inform legislators and policymakers whose help is critical to make this vision possible.

Attracting, Developing and Keeping Excellent Teachers

The single most important factor in a child's success in school is the teacher.

If we want to make sure all students have the same opportunity to learn, we have to make sure our teachers are highly trained and prepared to guide all students in all districts in the state.

There are factors critical to that goal: recruiting and retaining excellent teachers; quality and current teacher training programs; ongoing teacher professional development; feedback; collaborative time; supportive work environment; and, equitable pay.

The state has begun to address equitable pay through legislation passed in the second session of the 129th legislative session that requires a three-year ramp up of minimum teacher salaries to \$40,000 in the school year 2022-2023. There needs to be continued support in the state budget for increased starting pay and the ripple effect it will have on salary schedules. We recommend more options on affordable health care plans to free up dollars for competitive salaries for educators.

As we attract new teachers into public education, we need to support their growth and development in the classroom. The three-year probationary period should be restored to give administrators and teachers the time and resources needed to develop the skills to become highly effective teachers. Professional feedback also must be given through a teacher evaluation system that establishes high expectations tied to support and mentoring. The current system needs to be reviewed and refined to make sure it is effective.

Another key goal is to give teachers more time to teach and students more time to learn by extending the school year. This time has to be used intentionally. We need to examine current practice and identify ways to support all students in learning – those who are easily self-directed and those who need more guidance. Simply extending the school year without changing practice will continue to leave some students behind.

We recommend:

- State support for higher teacher salaries built on a \$40,000 minimum
- Increased number of paid teacher professional development days
- Longer school year of 180 student days and 10 teacher days
- Options on affordable health care plans
- College tuition subsidies/forgiveness

Support for the Whole Child

School districts are increasingly being asked to provide services and support to children that go far beyond classroom instruction and exceed what's been done in the past.

Not only have schools become an essential source for nutritional meals, we are dealing with the social, emotional and safety needs of children that must be addressed before they can learn. Cyberbullying is a 24-7 problem. Opioid use has destroyed too many families and left non-functioning caregivers in its wake. Chronic absenteeism is growing.

We accept these challenges and additional responsibilities to support and partner with families and become a community resource – connecting students and their caregivers with the services and support they need to succeed.

There must be clear direction from the executive branch to require the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services collaborate and coordinate services on behalf of children and families. Also needed is a robust program of interventions to address social-emotional, behavioral and learning challenges starting in Pre-Kindergarten.

We also must address bias and in our schools and communities to ensure that we are diverse, equitable and inclusive. Recognizing bias exists is the first step that must be followed by action to support a school and community culture that is supportive and welcoming to all. Ongoing work across the state with the Cultural Competence Institute will support this effort and also inform next steps.

We recommend:

- Mandatory school attendance at age 5
- Longer school year of 180 student days and 10 teacher in-service days
- Updated chronic absenteeism and truancy laws
- Robust program of interventions starting in Pre-K
- Collaboration between DOE and DHHS
- Funding social and emotional support services in schools
- More afterschool and summer learning programs
- Bond funding for safe and healthy schools.

Workforce Development

The needs of employers and the reality that traditional four-year college programs create extraordinary debt require us to rethink how we can best prepare students for a successful future.

We must continue to think more strategically about multiple pathways in education to make sure our students can pursue meaningful career paths. We also are obligated to assure Maine has enough workers to fill jobs that are open today and attract and grow new businesses.

Introduction to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) and the careers demanding those skills, along with expanded opportunities to get hands-on training, support that effort.

A significant step was made recently when the Legislature changed the way it funds Career and Technical Education (CTE), with the goal of increasing enrollment and giving earlier access to CTE programs for high school and middle school students. Also significant is the continued support for dual enrollment in Community Colleges or the University System, so students can earn college credits at a reduced cost while in high school.

Public education is the key to economic development in the state. We need better coordination between employers and school leaders, and, on the state level, between the Departments of Education and Labor.

We recommend:

- Business/industry school apprenticeships
- State-incentivized job training programs
- Earlier access to CTE programs
- CTE programs in underserved areas
- Real and virtual job shadow programs

Educational Opportunities for All Learners

All children learn differently. We encourage a variety of pathways for learning and assessing knowledge gained, to legitimize learning opportunities outside of the traditional classroom. Those non-traditional settings include distance learning, internships, on-the-job training, and early college.

The distance learning that was implemented during the pandemic needs to be improved and recognized as a viable alternative or supplement to in-person instruction. It can allow students to be enrolled in multiple schools at one time, for example high school and Community College.

We will measure successful learning by embracing the achievement of standards through work that integrates critical content areas through a multiple-pathways approach.

Our goal is to set a reasonable proficiency requirement that assures students, regardless of where they live, will be given instruction and support to demonstrate meeting standards in critical content areas.

We also support state adoption of the Redefining Ready benchmarks as key indicators of readiness for post-secondary education, careers and good citizenship.

We recommend:

- Commitment to multiple pathways for all learners
- Degree programs that prepare teachers to instruct in multiple pathways and settings
- Professional support for all teachers in online instruction.
- State adoption of the Redefining Ready benchmarks