

THE DECLINE OF MAINE K-12 EDUCATION

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**MAINE POLICY
INSTITUTE**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report chronicles the decline of Maine K-12 public education over the last 38 years. In the 1990s, Maine students consistently ranked first or second on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for math and reading. By 2022, the state averaged a rank of 36th.

2. State and federal mandates set Maine on a downward path. Government undermined local control over education, with four deleterious effects:

Experimental methods. Teachers have been required to adopt new ways of teaching, testing, and managing their classes. While earlier interventions raised test scores, those of the past decade led them to fall and blurred the line between teacher, therapist, and activist.

Unreasonable expectations. Schools are now expected to raise test scores and college attendance rates while shrinking achievement gaps, keep students safe while reducing discipline, and uphold a litany of other complex and conflicting responsibilities.

Increased administration. Teachers and administrators must spend more time on planning, paperwork, and reporting, which they cite as a significant source of job stress. The median American teacher spends just 50 percent of their time teaching and 26 percent on grading, planning, and administrative duties.

Dissatisfied educators. Only 32 percent of experienced teachers in Maine are “very satisfied” with their job, and 56 percent recently considered quitting the profession. Despite higher job satisfaction rates, 55 percent of administrators are thinking about leaving too.

3. Behavioral issues have increased. Since 2014, incidents involving violence, drugs, and weapons in Maine schools have nearly tripled. Seclusions and restraints have doubled, with Maine teachers restraining and secluding students more than in any other state.

4. Girls are struggling with mental health. In 2021, 48 percent of Maine high school girls felt sad or hopeless, 33 percent self-harmed, and 11 percent attempted suicide. 1 in 25 now identifies as transgender, with this number having tripled between 2017 and 2021. Guidance counselors working in Maine schools have helped students to gender transition without parental knowledge or consent.

5. Maine education has become ideological. Students and teachers now participate in protests at school and openly share their divisive views. Maine’s education institutions prioritize therapeutic and ideological initiatives like social-emotional learning and diversity, equity, and inclusion over conventional academics. The majority of Mainers do not support these changes, with 77 percent saying they would prefer teachers focus on basics like math, reading, and writing.

6. COVID-19 hit Maine schools hard. Maine experienced one of the largest drops in test scores during the pandemic. Educators are leaving in droves, with 1,311 quitting and 927 retiring in 2022. Today, the state faces one of the direst teacher shortages in America.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing issues facing America is the decline of its K-12 public education system. Today's students are falling behind academically and experiencing high rates of mental health and behavioral issues. Their teachers feel burnt out and many are leaving the profession. School administrators are struggling to fulfill their duties while keeping up with the fast pace of policy change. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these problems, but by no means created them.

Those who wish to address these issues must begin by identifying the changes that have taken place over the previous decades and connecting them to the dysfunction we see today. This is the approach which informs the following analysis of Maine's K-12 public education system from 1984 to 2022. It details how students in Maine went from among America's top performers to among its lowest.

This is a story about decline, which can be hard to observe in real time. Equally difficult to discern is one true culprit. A complex set of policies and decisions brought us to the present day, and both left and right are responsible for Maine's current situation. Even so, it is fair to state that what has happened in Maine has much to do with the centralization and bureaucratization of K-12 education that has taken place over the past four decades. As teachers had their autonomy undermined, the education of Maine children was determined increasingly by politicians, bureaucrats, and consultants who brought in experimental pedagogies and programs.

When it comes to test scores, it is clear that the reforms of the mid-2010s, that is, Common Core

State Standards and proficiency-based education, were associated with falling academic achievement in Maine. Scores plunged further during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools went online and the Maine Department of Education began prioritizing social-emotional learning and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. These choices were informed by the view, held by Maine's Commissioner of Education among others, that students are underperforming in school because they are stressed, anxious, and traumatized, and that academic learning must take a backseat until students feel safe, healthy, and engaged. This is a dismal educational environment for all involved, and one in which avid learners and devoted educators find little fulfillment.

About This Report

The first section of this report, [Evidence of Decline](#), highlights the issues facing Maine education today and how the quality of education has fallen over time. This is followed by an investigation into [What Caused the Decline?](#) and why Maine education in particular has gotten worse. [Part I: Reform](#) tells the story of how politicians in Augusta began standardizing education with laws like the Maine Education Reform Act of 1984 and the Maine Learning Results, telling teachers what to teach and how to measure their success as teachers. [Part II: No Child Left Behind](#) looks at how the federal government's first major education mandate for states played itself out in Maine. [Part III: Standards-Based Education](#) examines years of rising test scores reversed under Obama-era reforms that laid the groundwork for the politicized and faux-

therapeutic education seen in [Part IV: Ideological Education](#).

The history covered in this report spans almost 40 years. Special attention is given to how state and federal laws have shaped schools and classrooms and how expectations of students, teachers, and administrators have evolved. School finances and broader economic trends are discussed minimally, but the lighter treatment of these issues should not be taken to imply they are insignificant. Several teachers and parents were interviewed for this report, and their stories are interspersed throughout.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is used to measure academic achievement in math and reading. The NAEP is a congressionally mandated test administered by the National Center for Education Statistics. It involves a representative sample of students in each state taking the test every

two to four years. While Maine has used other standardized tests throughout the years as well, they were not administered as consistently as the NAEP, so are not drawn on here.

This report discusses issues surrounding race, gender, and sexuality education in Maine schools. While these topics can be divisive, their inclusion in this report is necessary because they affect what students learn and how they are treated at school. While individuals in good faith can disagree about these issues, schools that promote divisive ideological views violate the public trust, alienate many of their students and staff, and distract from core functions of schooling, such as teaching children mathematics, science, and history.

Finally, special thanks are extended to Libby Palanza for assisting with the research for this report, and to all friends and colleagues who provided feedback on early drafts.

EVIDENCE OF DECLINE

Academic Achievement

Declining NAEP Scores

In 1992, Maine 4th graders were ranked first in math and second in reading on the NAEP. In 1994, the next year reading was tested, they achieved first place. In 1996, Maine 4th graders ranked first in math, and 8th graders ranked second. And in 1998, the first year in which Maine 8th graders took the reading NAEP, they came first.¹

Throughout the 1990s, Maine scored well above the

national average and served as a model state for K-12 education, with other states moving to imitate its standards and practices.²

Today, the picture is starkly different. In 2022, Maine 4th graders ranked 36th in math and 40th in reading while 8th graders ranked 28th in math and 38th in reading. When averaged together, Maine's overall rank for 2022 is 36th. In the past 30 years, the state of Maine has gone from being a top-ranked state to a low-ranked state for K-12 education, as depicted in Figure 1.

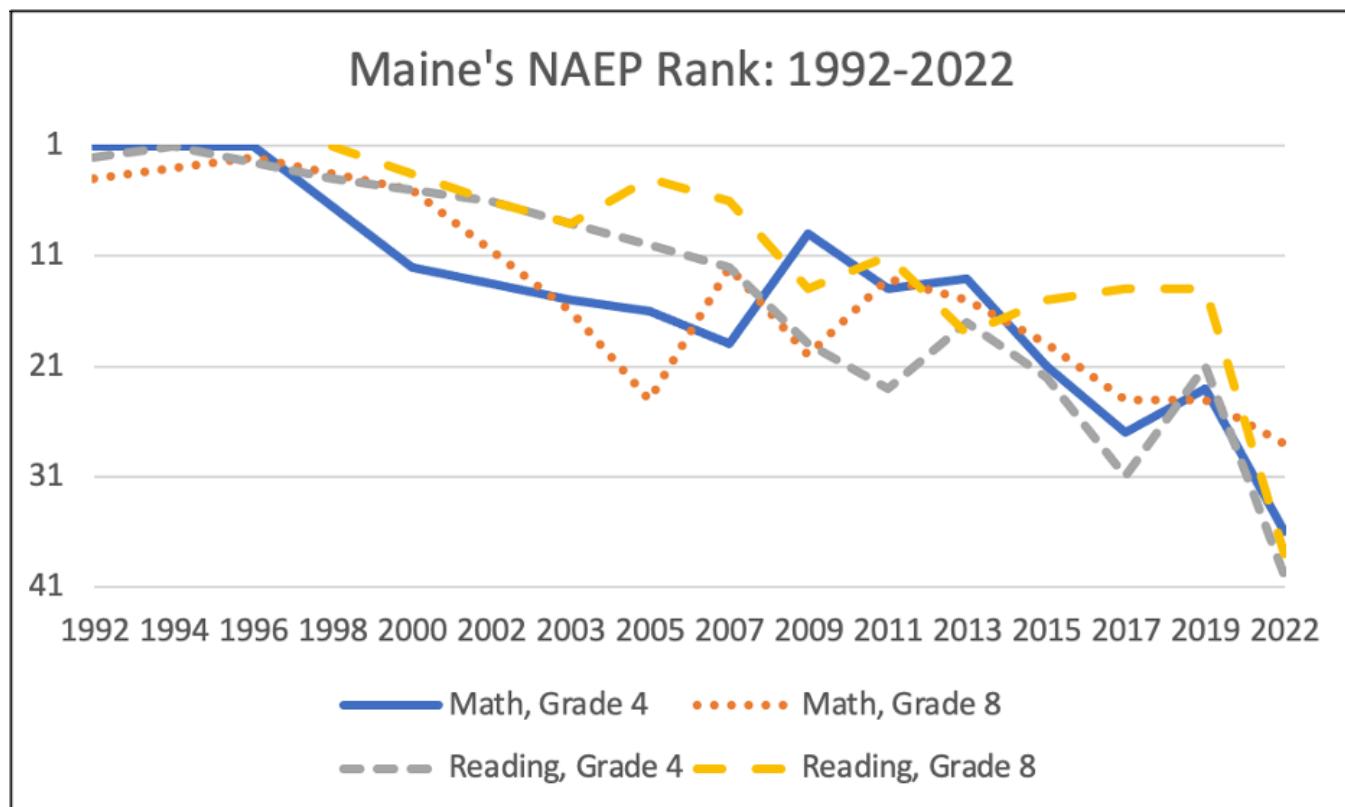


Figure 1. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Figure 2 plots the raw scores on which these rankings are based. We see that Maine students' math scores rose throughout the 2000s before falling in 2015, while reading scores were fairly stagnant. Both math and reading scores plunged in

2022, reflecting educational setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most recent math and reading scores are about the same or lower than they were in the 1990s.

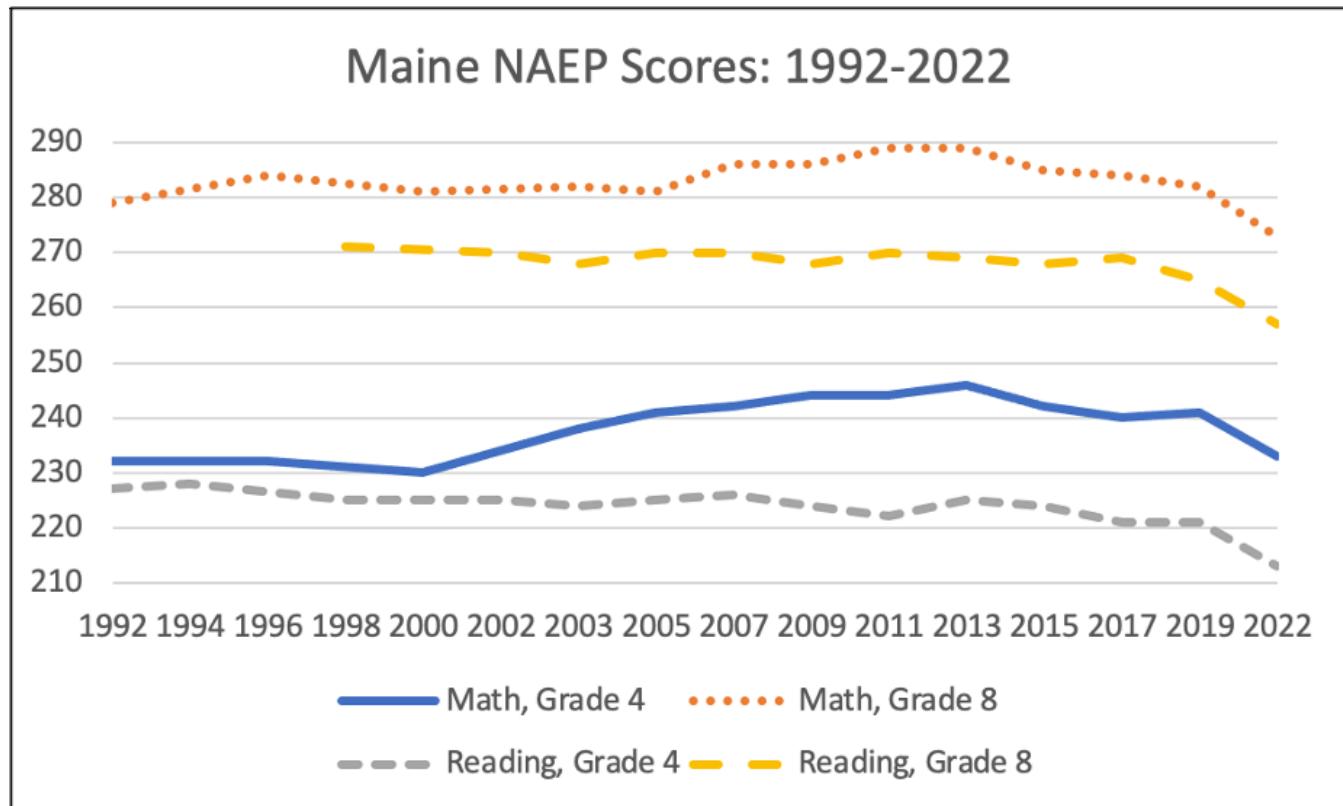


Figure 2. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Examining proficiency in math and reading, defined by the National Center for Education Statistics as "solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter," we observe similar trends as we did for the raw scores.³ Figure 3 shows

that the percentage of Maine students proficient or advanced in math rose throughout the 2000s and started to fall in 2015, while the percentage proficient or advanced in reading stagnated before falling in 2022.

Percent of Maine Students Proficient or Advanced on NAEP: 1992-2022

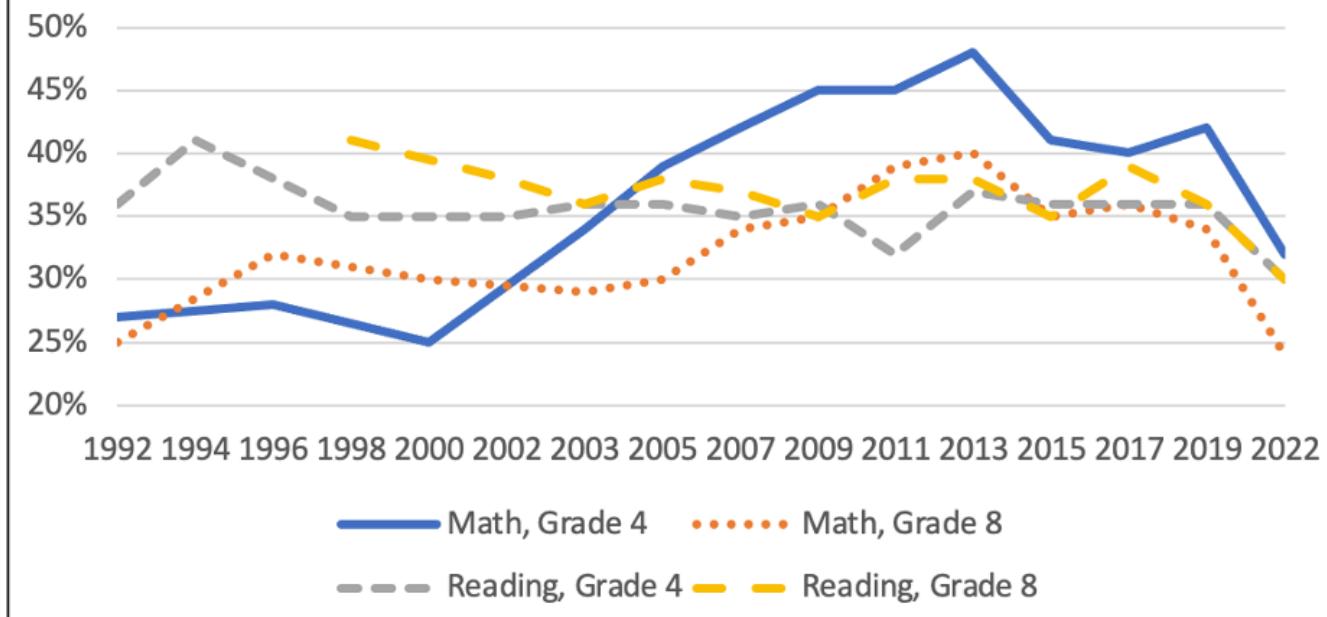


Figure 3. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

In 2015, the gains in math Maine students had made since 2000 began to reverse. This decline coincides with Maine's adoption of Common Core State Standards and proficiency-based education. These were adopted by other states as well, and indeed

Maine's trajectory looks similar to national and New England trends. Figure 4 plots the Grade 8 NAEP math and reading scores for Maine, an average of the other New England states, as well as the national average.

Grade 8 NAEP Scores: 1992-2022

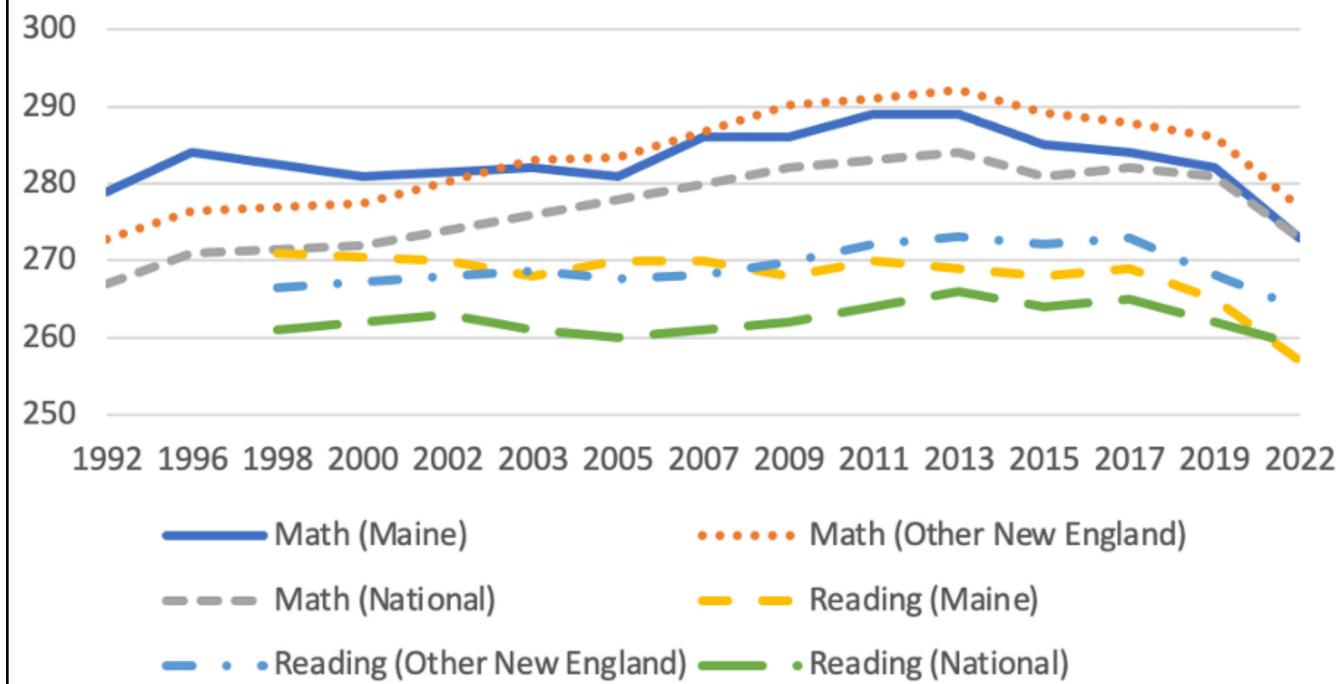


Figure 4. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

School finance issues, such as budget cuts, do not explain Maine's recent decline in test scores. Figure 5 shows that between 2006 and 2022, the average inflation-adjusted amount Maine schools spent on

each pupil rose by 20 percent, yet math and reading proficiency have stayed about the same or fallen as spending has increased.⁴

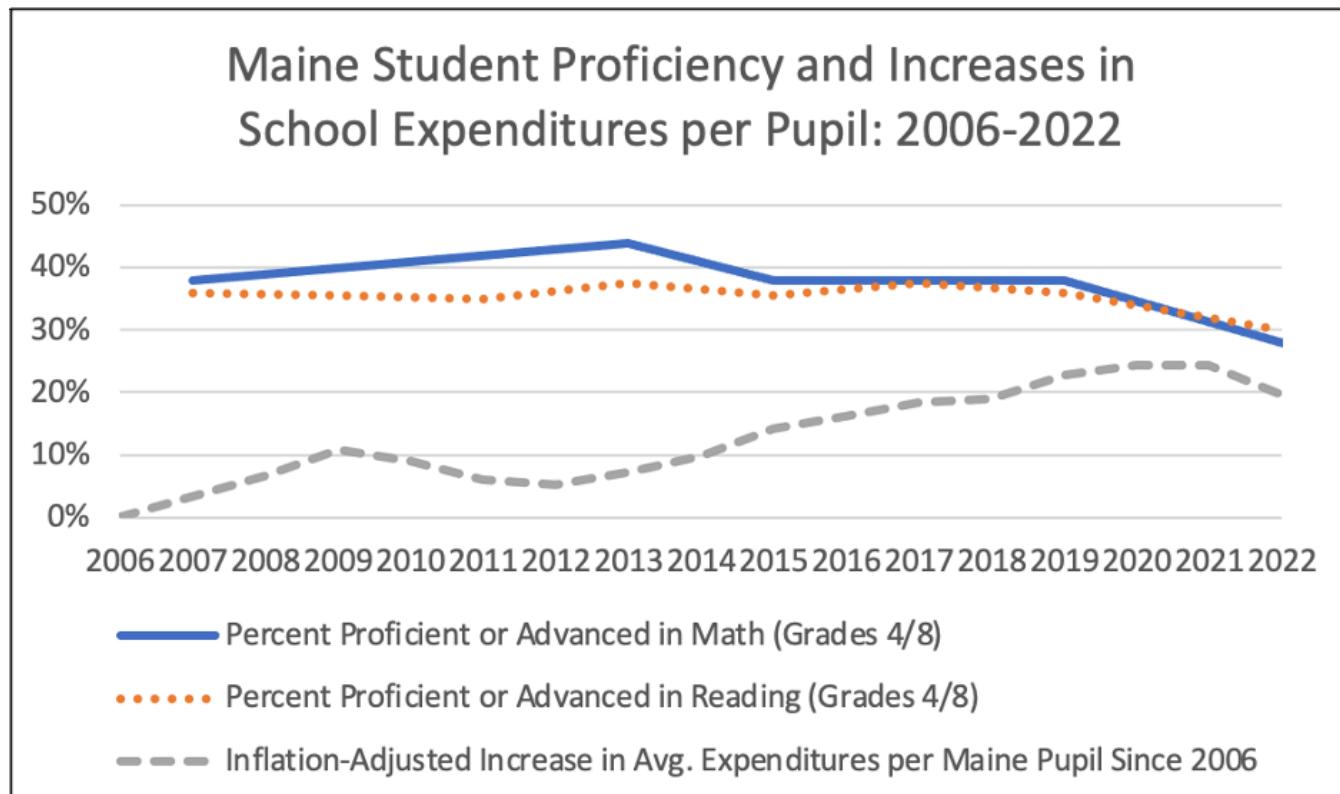


Figure 5. Source: National Center for Education Statistics; Maine Department of Education.

Stagnation in Educational Attainment

An issue that has agitated Maine policymakers is that despite a high rate of high school graduation, Mainers have not historically attended or completed college in proportionately high numbers. Maine is one of the top ten states for high school completion, but historically one of the bottom ten states for postsecondary enrollment.⁵

For over 20 years, Maine's 4-year graduation rate has hovered at around 85 percent and has generally been above average for the U.S.⁶ Despite high graduation numbers, however, both the number of Maine students who attend college after graduating high school and the number who complete their college degree within six years has hovered around 60 percent since 2008.⁷ This amounts to roughly 36

percent of high school graduates attending and completing college within six years of their enrollment.

Since 2009, the number of working-age Mainers who have attained a postsecondary degree increased by 9 percent. Increases in associate degrees account for 1 percent of the growth, bachelor's degrees 5 percent, and graduate or professional degrees the remaining 3 percent.⁸ While Maine lags behind the rest of New England in terms of the percentage of the population with a postsecondary degree, it has mirrored the national average since at least 2009.⁹

Over a 40-year career, Mainers who attain a bachelor's degree are expected to earn an average of \$3,262,281. This is \$767,479 (31 percent) more than those whose highest level of attainment is an

associate's degree, and \$1,120,673 (52 percent) more than those who only attain a high-school diploma, as illustrated in Figure 6. However, bachelor's degree holders in Maine are expected to earn an average of \$720,123 (21 percent) less than

other bachelor's degree holders in New England throughout a 40-year career.¹⁰

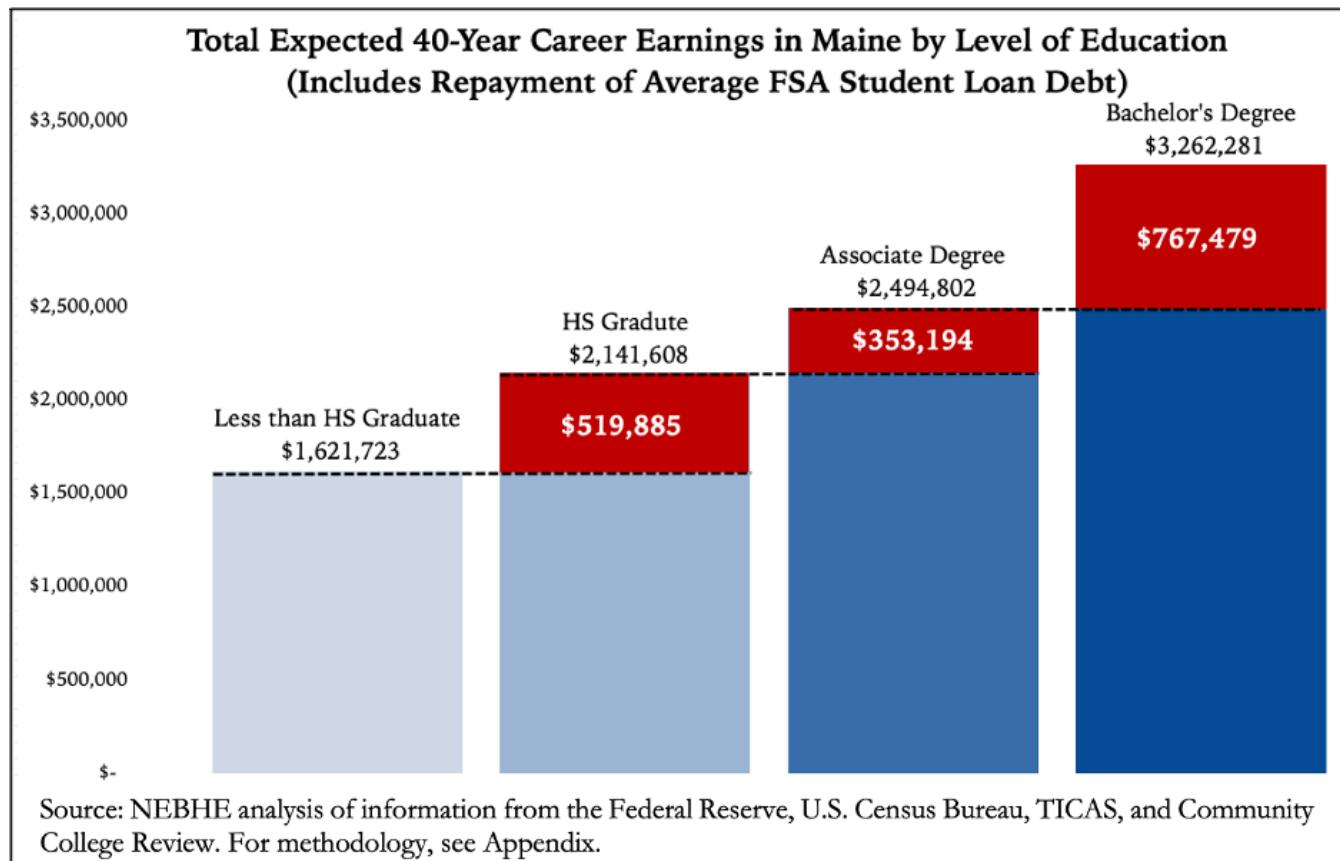


Figure 6. Source: Murphy, Stephanie M. 2019. "What's the Value of Higher Education in Maine?" New England Board of Higher Education.

Dissatisfied Teachers

Teachers in Maine today are increasingly unhappy with their jobs and are considering leaving the profession. According to a 2020 study of 752 Maine teachers conducted by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, only 32 percent of experienced teachers were "very satisfied" with their job, and 56 percent had seriously considered quitting the profession the year prior. Many teachers complained about a lack of administrative support, and having to bring work home because they were not given enough time to plan and prepare during school hours. Over 70 percent said the stress of their job had negatively impacted their sleep.¹¹

Student Disability, Behavior, and Mental Health Issues

In the 2020 study of Maine teachers, their most common source of stress was the difficulties of dealing with students' disabilities, behavior, and mental health issues. Here is a sampling of their comments:

- "[I am] concerned about the ever-increasing number of students that are coming through the system that have/need behavior issues/problems with no avenue for help for them. They have to stay in the regular classroom and completely disrupt the entire class. Schools need funds and avenues for these students to learn

- and be successful."
- "I think that trauma, parental drug use, and an increase in disabilities is changing the teaching profession and that many schools are not equipped with the resources and strategies to handle this change. I'd like to see an increase in interventions through Elementary School through qualified social work services, behavioral coaching, and PBIS [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports] teams. I also think outside of education there needs to be more wrap around services for families because in some circumstances we can see writing on the wall with these kiddos and our hands are tied to help improve their outcome especially once they hit HS age."
 - "Very needy kids are coming to school, and schools are doing their best to meet their needs, but teachers are overwhelmed. We have way more behavior problems and kids living in traumatic situations. It is more challenging now to be in the classroom than ever before."¹²
- Teachers' concerns are borne out by data on the disability status, behavioral issues, and mental health problems of students. To receive special education, students must have a disability such as autism, speech impairment, or a learning disability. As shown in Figure 7, 13 percent of Maine students had been diagnosed with such a disability in 1992, while 20 percent were in 2022. Today Maine ranks 3rd amongst the states for the highest share of public school students with a disability, behind only New

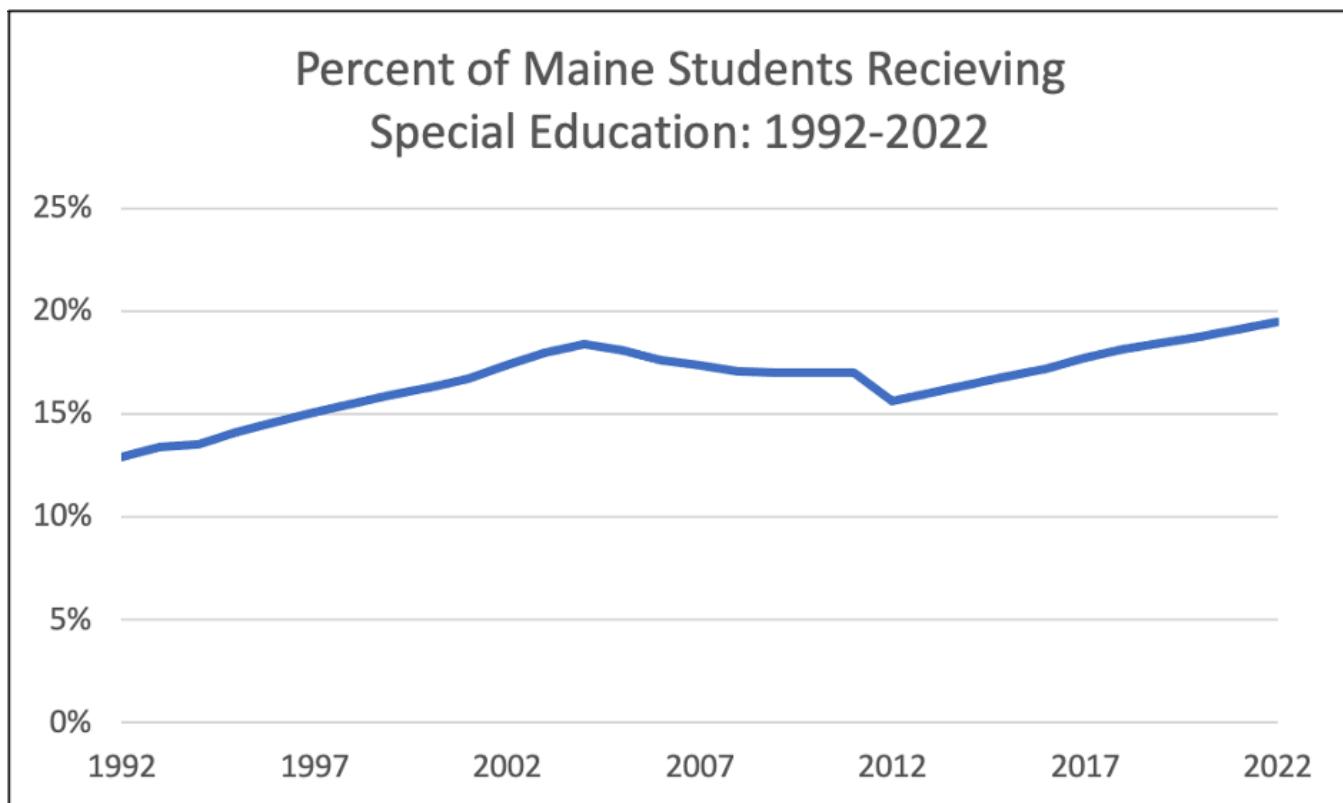


Figure 7. Source: Harris and Jain. 2002. "Special Education in Maine: Attaining Equity Through Program and Finance Reform." Maine Education Policy Research Institute; Maine Department of Education.

York and Pennsylvania.¹³

Maine teachers seclude (isolate a student away from their peers to prevent disruption or harm) and restrain (use physical force to limit the movement of a student so they do not harm themselves or others) students at the highest rate of any state. 90 percent

of the students who are restrained or secluded have a disability, and many are in elementary school.¹⁴ As seen in Figure 8, since 2014 the number of violence-, drug-, and weapon-related behavioral incidents reported by Maine schools has nearly tripled from 4,989 to 13,793, while seclusions have doubled from 2,394 to 4,539, and restraints have doubled from

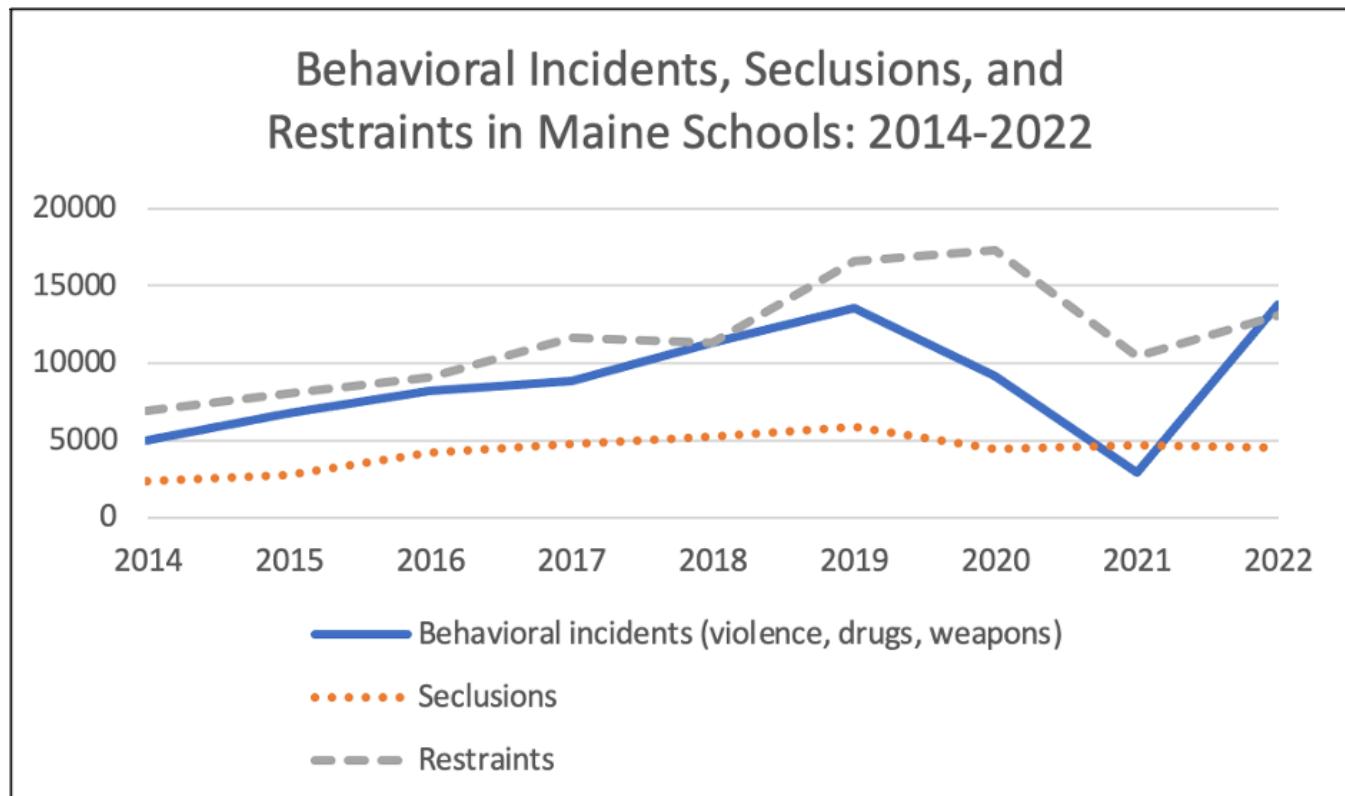


Figure 8. Source: Maine Department of Education.

6,930 to 13,074. These numbers were on a trajectory to rise higher had the COVID-19 pandemic not limited in-person attendance.

Mental health has also become a significant issue for Maine students. Figure 9 shows that in 2021, 36 percent of Maine high school students reported

being sad or hopeless every day for two or more weeks, 19 percent seriously considered suicide, 14 percent made a suicide plan, 23 percent self-harmed, and 9 percent attempted suicide.

These numbers represent the total student population, and are even more extreme when

Percent of Maine High School Students Reporting Mental Health Issues in Past Year: 2009-2021

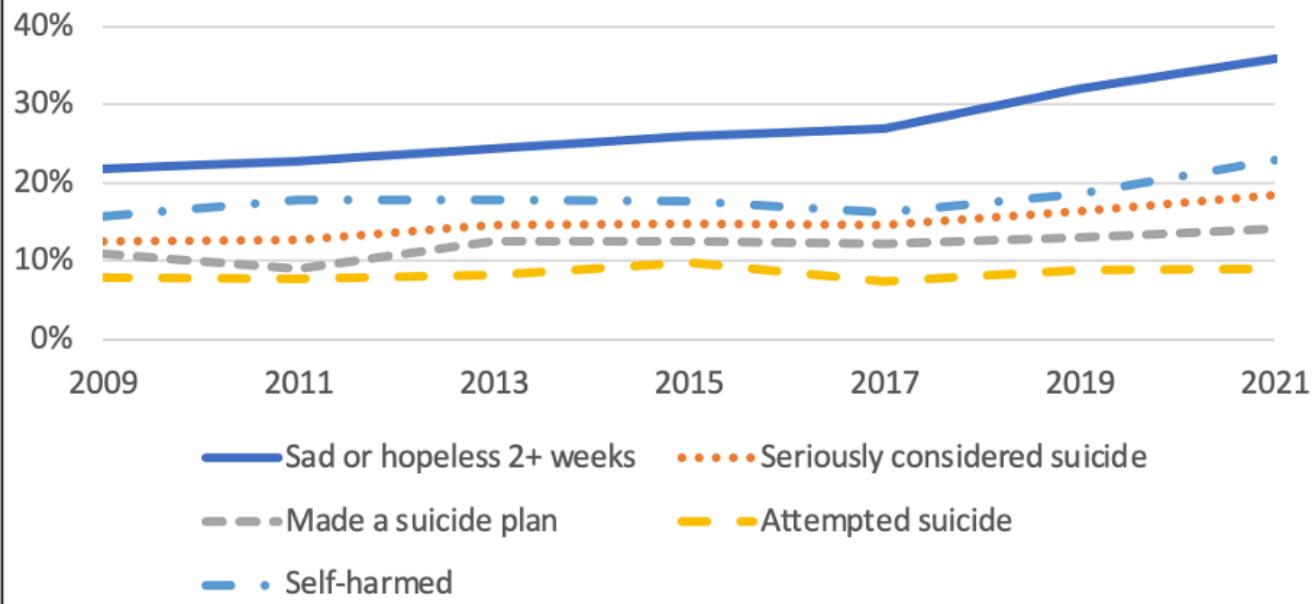


Figure 9. Source: "Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey." Maine Department of Education.

looking just at Maine's high school girls. Figure 10 shows that in 2021, 48 percent of high school-aged girls felt sad or hopeless every day for two or more weeks, 33 percent self-harmed, 24 percent seriously

considered suicide, 19 percent made a suicide plan, and 11 percent attempted suicide. Affirmative responses in each of these categories has significantly increased over the preceding decade.

Percent of Maine High School Girls Reporting Mental Health Issues in Past Year: 2009-2021

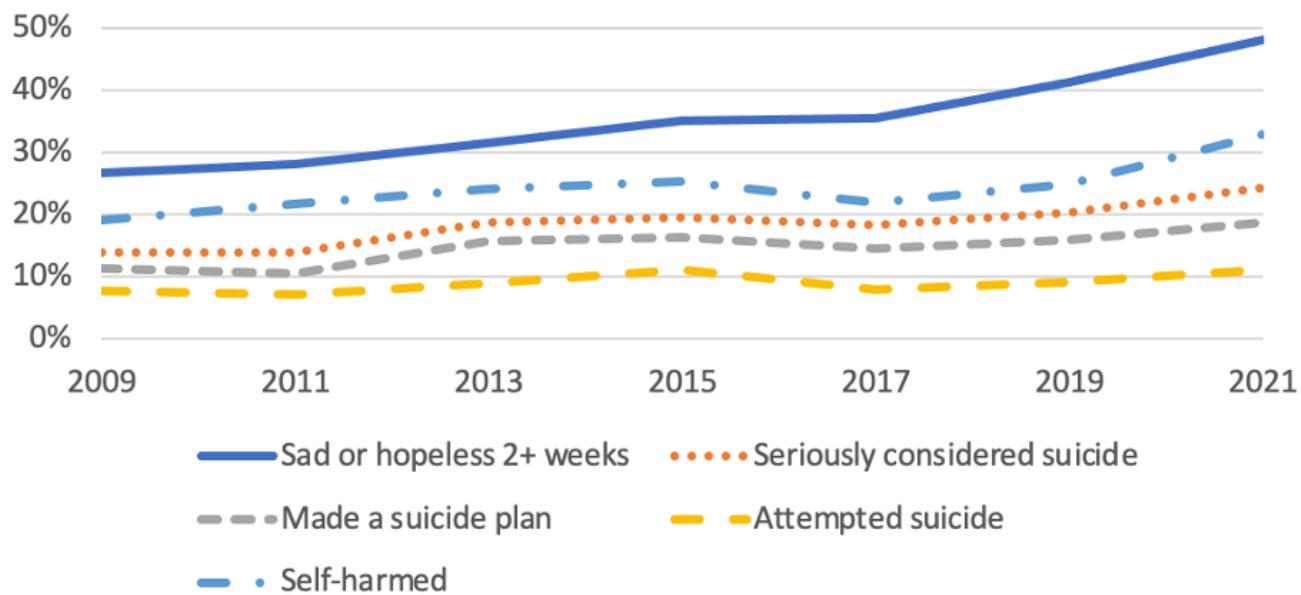


Figure 10. Source: "Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey." Maine Department of Education.

Paperwork and Reporting

The second most common source of stress that Maine teachers reported in the 2020 study was paperwork and reporting:

- “You really need to address the intense amount of paperwork/reports etc. that teachers need to do in addition to everything else.”
- “Please let teachers have more time to do their job instead of saddling them down with paperwork such as teaching portfolios.”
- “You absolutely need to cut back on paperwork for SPED [special education] teachers. It is taking away from actually teaching students. A complete overhaul of SPED practices needs to be

done so the teacher can be freed up to teach students that have learning issues. It’s such common sense that the more demands you place on a SPED teacher the less work they will/can do with their students.”¹⁵

While Maine-level data on how teachers spend their time is currently unavailable, a 2022 survey of American teachers conducted by Merrimack College (Figure 11) found that the median teacher nationwide spends only half their work hours (25 hours weekly) teaching, and the other half on tasks such as grading and feedback (5 hours weekly), planning and preparation (5 hours weekly), helping students (5 hours weekly), and administrative work (3 hours weekly).

Median hours per week teachers spend on in- and out-of-school work



Figure 11. Source: "1st Annual Merrimack College Teacher Survey." 2022. Ed Week Research Center.

Similar data for earlier years with which to compare was not collected, but teachers interviewed for this report said that fewer hours were spent on non-teaching activities than had been spent in earlier decades.

Uncompetitive Salaries

Teachers in the 2020 study also cited low pay as a significant source of job dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Many said that Maine pay was uncompetitive and that they were considering moving to other states where pay was better:

— “I am in my third year of teaching full time, with graduate level certification, and am only making \$36,000/year. Most teachers I know need second or third jobs because the pay is too low to make ends meet...This will be my last year teaching in Maine, but I am willing to give teaching another chance in a state that pays a reasonable salary in comparison to the cost of living.”

— “The \$40k entry pay is a joke. I’m 4 yrs in and just hitting \$40k so there’s no help to those who didn’t start this year. I also make less money than my 16 yr. old making minimum wage. Let that sink in. It’s embarrassing and insulting.”

— “Competitive salaries with neighboring states (NH and MA) would keep and attract quality educators and their families to move to and stay in Maine! As of right now, the pay here is minimal and cost of living is high.”¹⁶

Maine teachers are correct to feel they are taking home less than their peers in neighboring states. As shown in Figure 12, the average Maine teacher took home \$58,757 in 2020, around \$16,000 less than the average teacher from other New England states and about \$8,000 less than the average American teacher.

Given rising rates of unhappiness and professional dissatisfaction among Maine teachers, driven by

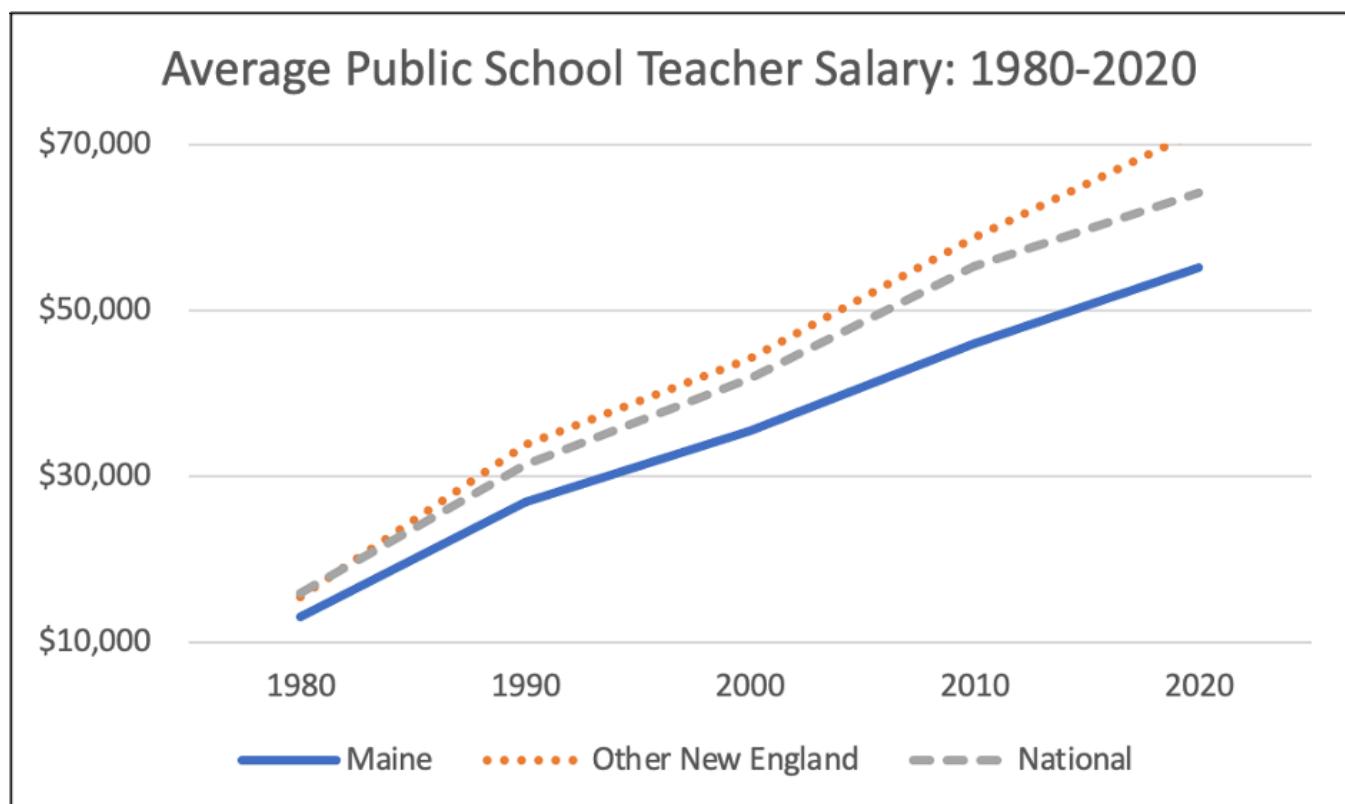


Figure 12. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

concerns over their students' disabilities, behavioral issues and mental health, excessive time spent on paperwork and reporting, pay below their New England peers, and, although undiscussed above, the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is no wonder

that Maine currently faces one of the worst teacher shortages in its history, with 1,311 educators leaving their jobs and 927 retiring in 2022, as can be seen in Figure 13.

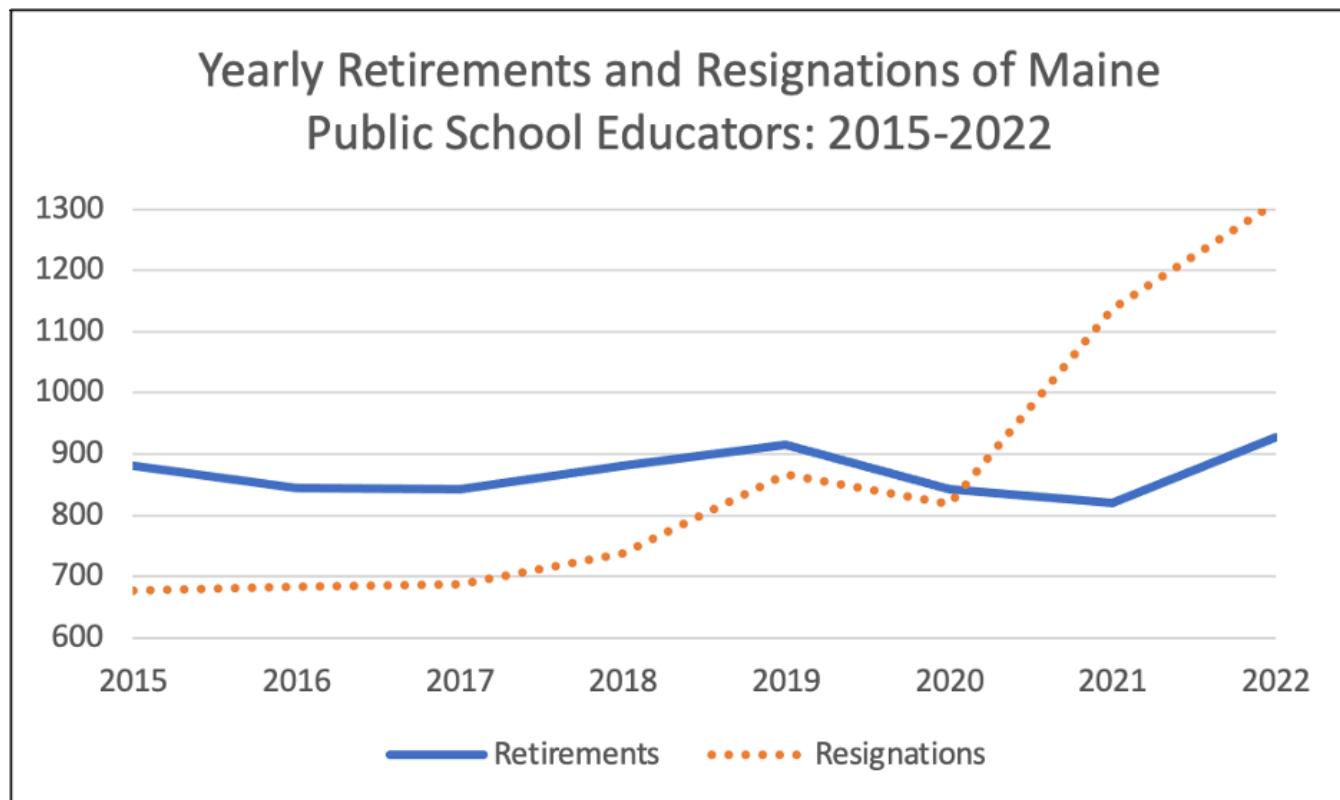


Figure 13. Number of Education Resignations. Source: Ellin, Melissa. 2023. "As Teacher Departures Rise, Solutions Could be a Year or More Away." *The Maine Monitor*.

Overwhelmed Administrators

The 2020 Maine Education Policy Research Institute study of teachers cited above also included a sample of 295 public school administrators in Maine. They reported being overwhelmed with work, and high rates of burnout and turnover. Between 2016 and 2018, 31 percent left their positions. In 2019, 45 percent of principals and 62 percent of superintendents had less than 5 years of experience in their position type, and 26 percent of principals and 22 percent of superintendents had fewer than two years.¹⁷

While 88 percent of experienced administrators say they were satisfied with their roles, 55 percent said

they had seriously considered leaving in the past year. Only 40 percent of superintendents reported that they were seriously considering leaving, versus 59 percent of principals, 60 percent of curriculum coordinators, and 71 percent of special education directors. 83 percent work more than 10 hours a week outside of the school day and 40 percent work 20 or more additional hours, with some describing their jobs as 24/7 positions.

Those who worked 20 or more extra hours per week, as opposed to 10, were 27 percent more likely to say they were seriously considering leaving their jobs, indicating that a high volume of work and long hours are significant factors in turnover.¹⁸

Unrealistic Expectations

The most common source of stress among Maine administrators in the 2020 study was high self-expectations. They repeatedly emphasized the intense pressures they were under, and how little time and resources they had to complete the tasks required of them:

- “The majority of my day is putting out fires... Staff support, parent needs and paperwork consume that majority of my days. My job is impossible and when I speak to my colleagues everyone is in the same boat. We are expected to be on the job 24/7. We are all burned to a crisp.”
- “That’s the biggest stressor, that there are simply far too many demands to do any aspect of it really well. I come out of an hour meeting, for example, to find 2-3 hours’ worth of emails and to-do items that have piled up in that hour.... I think it’s important for policymakers to recognize that the pressures and tasks are relentless, that this drives some from administration, and that others not yet in administration see this and don’t want it for themselves, hence shortages.”
- “Public schools are expected to do far more than we have the resources to support.”¹⁹

Heavy Reporting

In their comments, administrators frequently mentioned reporting requirements as an issue:

- “Stop the constant stream of reports -- PreK, Teacher Eval, NEO reports, GaTE [gifted and talented education] applications, etc., etc.”
- “New State mandates and reporting take time away from important work with staff and students.”
- “State reporting is all consuming. The same information is asked for on multiple forms (i.e. attendance and behavior on CAN [comprehensive needs assessment] as well as district reports).”²⁰

Fast-Paced Policy Changes

Administrators also complained about the fact that education policies were changing too quickly, and that policymakers kept changing their goals and objectives:

- “Policymakers and lawmakers are continuously changing and moving the goal posts for schools and districts.”
- “It is nearly impossible to keep up with the continuous changes at the state level. I would love more autonomy to use my expertise in order to help our district make the best decisions in order to support our students.”
- “Hold targets still so schools can hit them. It takes years to make meaningful change in schools. Yo-yoing between different assessments and standards sets, perpetually enacting new mandates for schools makes the job feel insurmountable at times and perpetuates the ‘just wait a few minutes and this too shall pass’ mindset among some educators.”²¹

Indeed, state and federal policymakers over the last few decades have repeatedly attempted to reinvent public education, introducing new methods of teaching, testing, grading, administration, and organization, as well as new social causes and goals. These changes, whether they come from the district, state, or federal government, fall upon administrators to implement.

Vilified by Public

Adding to this, administrators reported feeling unsupported and unappreciated by the public, and said they were often blamed for problems they had no control over. In particular, they described being vilified by parents on social media or in the press as a major source of stress:

- “Administrators are often put in no win situations - we can never make everyone happy. We are almost always seen as the ‘bad guy’; the press/social media vilify administrators and

educators daily (and we can't respond), which makes it difficult to attract people to this profession - who wants to work in a field that is looked down on by most, where you are blamed for everything wrong with society?"

- "Community members perpetuating misperceptions in public forums, social media has escalated the level of stress associated with the job. I feel ill equipped to address this."
- "There are just so many years you can give your blood, sweat and tears and feel like it isn't enough... I cannot take being bashed on Facebook or social media when a parent doesn't get the outcome they desire involving their child. .. All of my decisions are based on what is best for the students in my district."²²

Mental Health and Behavioral Issues

As with teachers, one of administrators' biggest concerns was the mental health and behavioral issues of students:

- "The amount of mental health issues affecting students is causing a huge amount of stress on staff at all levels."
- "A majority of administration time is not on instruction and the teaching and learning, but on the growing number of dis-regulated children due to drugs and its overwhelming impact on families, communities and our culture."
- "Students are entering our school with greater needs, emotionally, behavioral and educationally. This is causing a strain on our resources across the board, (finances, space, staffing, etc.)"²³

Because of the factors discussed above such as high expectations, heavy reporting requirements, policymakers shifting the goalposts, hostility from the public, and the difficulty of dealing with the complex needs of today's students, districts are struggling to recruit and maintain administrators, particularly for leadership positions.

Decline in the Quality of Education

Pedagogical Changes

Four decades ago, Maine students learned in what would today be deemed a "traditional" manner. Teachers stood at the blackboard and taught from textbooks, students sat at their desks, took notes, and answered when called upon. While school boards decided the curriculum, teachers had a great deal of freedom in deciding how to teach and test. While there was variability in the quality of education between teachers, schools, and districts, students received instruction that could reliably be called an education.

Today, the education Maine students receive looks different. Many younger-grade teachers act more as facilitators than instructors, working one-on-one with students as they progress through the material individually. Often they are unable to have all their students in the same place at the same time, as students are pulled out of class for interventions, such as math, language, and behavioral help. In lieu of textbooks, many classes use online resources, which are typically of lower quality. Few teachers design their own lesson plans, choosing instead to download second hand PowerPoints from websites such as teacherspayteachers.com. Curriculum coordinators now play a major role in determining how students are taught and assessed, and administrators evaluate teachers using corporate teacher evaluation programs.

Lower Standards

When one compares primary source materials from the past and today, the degree to which school has been "dumbed down" becomes apparent. Take, for example, Maine's social studies standards from 1997 and 2019. Figure 14 shows the introduction to the 1997 standards, which impress upon the reader that "a strong social studies education depends upon a

clear understanding of its interrelated disciplines" and that a social science education spanning history, geography, and economics will allow students to better understand the multidisciplinary nature of "important contemporary issues such as health care, education, crime, the environment, and foreign policy."²⁴

By contrast, the 2019 standards briefly mention the multidisciplinary nature of the social sciences, and lists the key ideas in the social studies standards as "growth mindset," "understand," "various," "major enduring themes," and "eras" (see Figure 15).²⁵ Such empty platitudes would, in all likelihood, have never crossed the mind of the 1997 standards' authors.

Social Studies

The great architects of American public education, such as Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and John Dewey, considered a strong literacy essential to the preservation of democracy. Each believed that every student must be well versed in the nation's history, the principles which undergird citizenship, and the institutions which define our government. Understandings of commerce and geography were critical to their thinking as well.

In essence, Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey viewed the study of social studies as critical to the mission of public schools. Indeed, they would applaud the inclusion of a "responsible and involved citizen" in the Guiding Principles, as well as social studies as one of eight content areas in the *Learning Results*.

A strong social studies education depends upon a clear understanding of its interrelated disciplines. Without a knowledge of the geography and economics of earlier times, history offers only lists of people, events, and dates. Without a knowledge of history, the institutions of American government and the dynamics of today's global economy are difficult to understand.

Important contemporary issues such as health care, education, crime, the environment, and foreign policy are all multidisciplinary in nature. Understanding these issues and developing responses to them requires an integrated social studies education. In such a social studies program, students are actively engaged in inquiry, research, debate, and in-depth learning. Students can further enhance their knowledge of the world around them by using local communities as extended classrooms; they can learn to build on that knowledge and on their knowledge of history to construct insights into the future. A broad understanding of the perspectives central to social studies enables students to develop, practice, and apply the knowledge and experiences required to be contributing participants in a democratic society.

Although social studies curricula vary in their breadth and depth, the *Learning Results* have adopted a focused definition of this content area whereby government, history, geography, and economics stand as the pillars of the content with other disciplines within the social sciences deemed important, but not essential.

Figure 14. Introduction to Maine's 1997 Social Studies Standards. Source: Maine Department of Education.

Key Ideas in the Social Studies Standards:

Growth mindset - Our mindset includes beliefs about our abilities and qualities that include intelligence, creativity or musicality. Having a growth mindset means that students know that their abilities and strengths can change or develop, and that those changes are within their control.

Understand - The word “understand” appears in performance expectations throughout the Social Studies Standards. It refers to a variety of different levels of thinking and was used intentionally to serve as an umbrella term for the cognitive demand that is described by the descriptors beneath the performance expectations. Look to the grade level expectation for grades K-5 or to the grade span expectations in spans 6-8 and 9-12 (Foundational or Developmental as noted by “F” or “D”) to define the level of cognitive demand for student performance.

Various -The Social Studies Standards refer to “various” peoples, nations, regions of the world, historical eras, and enduring themes. School administrative units should develop a local curriculum that assists students in gaining a coherent, broad perspective on a variety of peoples, nations, regions, historical eras, and enduring themes.

Major Enduring Themes - The term “major enduring themes” is used in several places in the Social Studies Standards. This term refers to general topics or issues that have been relevant over a long period of time. Using a consistent set of themes can serve as a framework within which other concepts, topics, and facts can be organized. It can also help students make connections between events within and across historical eras, and use history to help make informed decisions. The Civics and Government, Personal Finance and Economics, Geography, and History Standards all include performance expectations that address individual, cultural, international, and global connections. It will be up to the School Administrative Units to determine whether they use these performance expectations as

Figure 15. Key Ideas in Maine’s 2019 Social Studies Standards. Source: Maine Department of Education.

Grade Inflation

As the quality of education has fallen, the grades students are receiving have gone up. This is due to grade inflation, a practice in which teachers give out higher grades for the same work or provide students with more opportunities for extra credit and makeup assignments to boost their marks. A 2019 study by the Center for National Education Statistics comparing high school transcripts with NAEP scores found that students were taking more rigorous classes and getting better grades than a decade ago but were scoring lower on standardized tests.²⁶

In Maine, college admissions offices have complained about the confusion caused by soaring high school GPAs, which make it difficult to select the best students, as high grades are no longer indicative of exceptional performance, with some of Maine’s largest schools graduating over 80 percent of their high school seniors with honors.²⁷

Ideological Education

Time which could be spent improving students’ knowledge and skills is increasingly allocated

towards inculcating students and teachers into a far-left worldview in which racial, gender, and sexual minorities are sacralised. Evidence of these changes, discussed in part IV of this report, are abundant:

- [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#). Every major education organization in Maine has signed a letter advocating for more diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools.
- [Equity Consultants](#). Districts are hiring high-priced consultants to train staff and conduct “equity audits.”
- [Social-Emotional Learning](#). Maine Department of Education promotes a program which masks the teaching of far-left ideology with a faux-therapeutic veneer.
- [Sexually Explicit Books](#). Maine’s school libraries are filled with age-inappropriate and sexually explicit LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus) books.
- [School-Facilitated Gender Transitions](#). Guidance counselors at Maine schools have helped students gender transition without parental knowledge or consent.

While Maine's education institutions support more ideological initiatives in schools, the public does not. Figure 16 shows the results from a recent poll of 1,982 Maine voters which found that a mere 16 percent believe schools should spend more time teaching about "gender, sexuality, and race," while 77 percent say they would prefer teachers focus on "the basics like math, reading, and writing." The opinion that schools should spend more time on basics and

less time teaching students about identity holds for every demographic subgroup except for self-identified liberals, 51 percent of whom back identity education. However, a majority of Maine Democrats (62 percent), many of whom do not self-identify as liberal, favor getting back to basics, indicating that opposition to identity education in schools cuts across partisan political lines among voters.

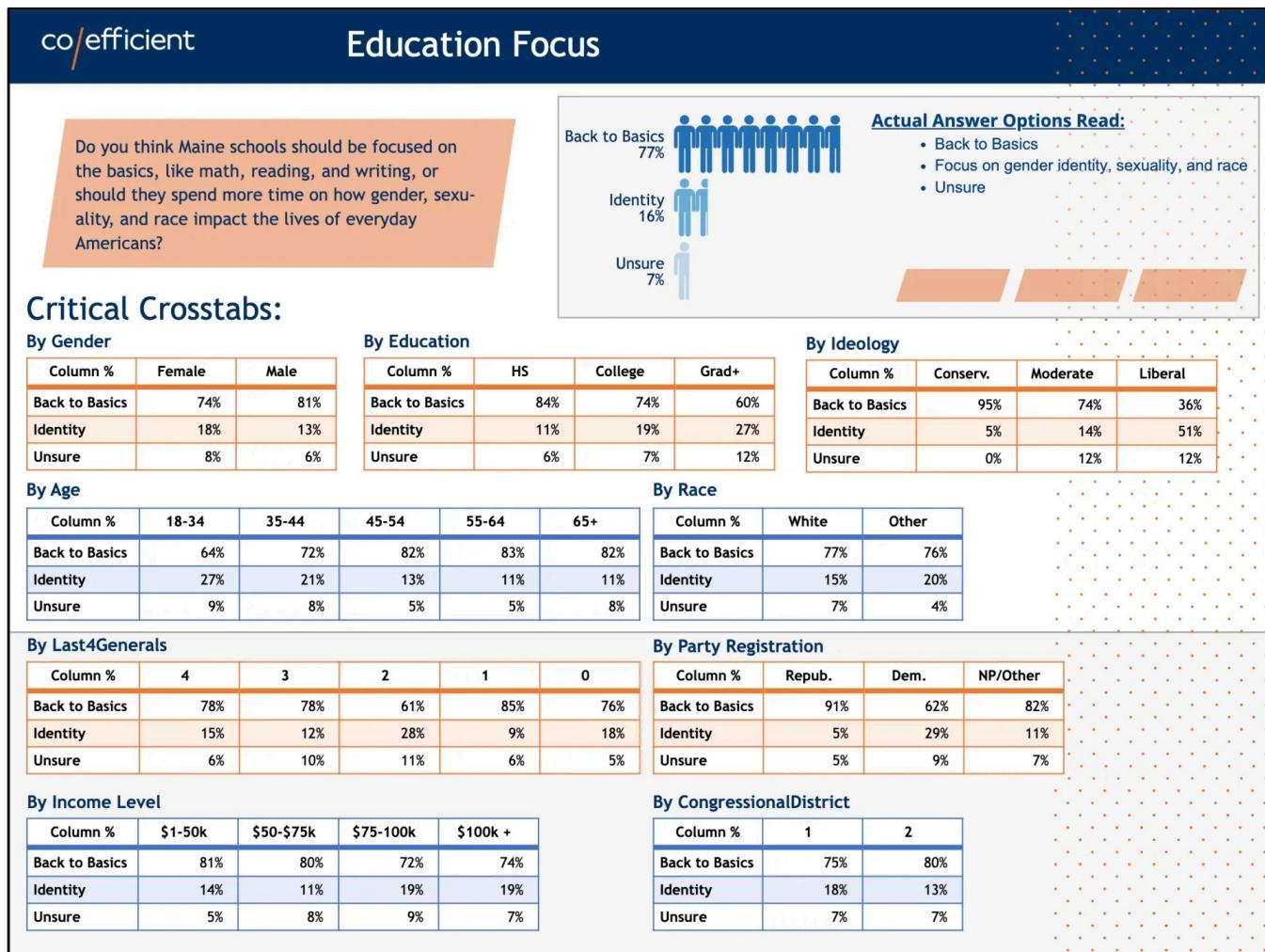


Figure 16. Source: "MAINE WIRE POLL: Most Maine Voters Say Schools Should Get "Back to Basics," Ditch DEI and Gender Programming." 2023. The Maine Wire.

WHAT CAUSED THE DECLINE?

While many factors have contributed to Maine's educational decline, the federal and state-level laws and policies of the past four decades have made its education system more top-down, centralized, and bureaucratic. On the whole, this has led to dissatisfaction among teachers, pressure on administrators, and a lower quality of education for students.

Starting in 1984 with the Maine Education Reform Act, Maine began to regulate its schools to an unprecedented degree. This was followed in 1992 by Maine's Common Core of Learning, a set of optional academic standards that became mandatory when they were transformed into the Maine Learning Results in 1997. In 2002, President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act asked schools to meet impossible goals or lose funding, requiring superintendents to take on new leadership roles. In 2009, President Barack Obama's Race to the Top put pressure on schools to adopt the Common Core State Standards, embrace charter schools, and increase teacher accountability. Maine did them all and adopted proficiency-based education, which changed the traditional classroom and grading system. After the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, Maine education became increasingly ideological, and schools began prioritizing students' social and emotional needs, even above academic success. The limits of this feelings-first approach to education were revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when classes went online and Maine's education institutions focused their attention on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Some of these reforms, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, were associated with improved academic outcomes. Others, most notably the

adoption of Common Core State Standards and proficiency-based education, were followed by declining test scores. Yet none were able to keep Maine students academically competitive with their New England neighbors or maintain the high NAEP rankings they had at the beginning of the 1990s.

What Motivated These Changes?

There have been three major driving forces behind the centralization and bureaucratization of education in Maine and elsewhere since the early 1980s: industry, accountability, and equity.

Industry

The business community has been among the most aggressive education lobbyists in Maine. They are motivated by the desire to create more skilled workers who will serve as future employees, and so push for standards that require students to develop and demonstrate specific skills. Maine business organizations played significant roles in shaping education legislation and policies within the state, including the Maine Education Reform Act of 1984, the Maine Learning Results, Common Core State Standards, and proficiency-based education. At the federal level, anxiety around American workers and businesses being outcompeted by other countries has driven policymakers to push for universal content standards and greater standardized testing, which have interfered with Maine's ability to control its own education.

Businesses can be sued for large sums of money if employees allege discrimination or harassment based on their identity. As such, it is in many businesses' financial interest to have employees who

have been sensitized to race, gender, and sexual issues. Social-emotional learning teaches students how to navigate diversity with compassion and sensitivity, and one of their selling points is that these skills are necessary for navigating the modern workplace.²⁸ Due to the changing politics of the wider business culture, a case can be made for this position.

Accountability

Education reformers want to ensure their reforms are being implemented. Skeptics of those reforms want to know whether they are effective or not. Consequently, both have an interest in establishing systems of accountability.

Standardized testing is one of the most used accountability measures for student and school performance. Maine has adopted several throughout the years: The Maine Education Assessment, the SAT, the NECAP (New England Common Assessment Program), the Smarter Balanced Tests, and the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) assessments. The significance of standardized testing in determining school funding under the No Child Left Behind Act led many teachers to prioritize helping their students achieve high scores over deeper and more lasting forms of learning. The widespread use of standardized tests has also revealed disparities in educational achievement between student subgroups, which are then used to justify more state intervention.

A subtle but critical change discussed in this report is the change in the accountability relationship between student and teacher. Teachers traditionally believed it was their job to teach lessons, and students' responsibility to learn. There was not an expectation that teachers should be held accountable for students who performed poorly in their class. Instead, the student was held accountable for their performance, with a natural expectation that

students would perform better or worse depending on their effort and intellect.

The reforms of the past forty years have led to teachers, schools, and districts being held accountable for problems they have little to no control over. Superintendents used to only manage the basic affairs of their district.

Today, they are asked to raise test scores and college attendance rates while shrinking identity-based achievement gaps; keep schools safe without disproportionately disciplining students; make informed selections of curricula, teacher evaluation systems, and professional development; improve their students' mental health; maintain a balanced budget; and be responsive to their school board and community. This is too much work for a single individual, even with the help of supporting administrators, the school board, and the community.

Equity

Maine's reforms in the 1980s and 1990s were an explicit attempt to reduce economic and geographical inequities in Maine schools, ensuring children received a high-quality education and a valuable diploma no matter where they lived, which school they attended, or which teachers they had. Maine's gradual incorporation of special education and disabled students into regular public schools, which involved restricting the freedom of teachers to manage their class as they saw fit, reflected a deeply held belief that no students were more or less capable, only adequately or inadequately supported. During Obama's presidency, educational inequities around race and gender received greater focus. This was due in large part to his Department of Education's policy guidance that made schools liable for racial disparities in school discipline and required schools to treat transgender students as their preferred gender, though Maine's supreme court had required Maine schools to take this course of action two years prior. States applying for

education grants were more likely to receive them if they had a plan to close achievement gaps and equitably distribute highly-effective teachers and principals across high-poverty and high-minority schools.²⁹ And unlike the No Child Left Behind Act which stripped funding from low-performing schools, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 gave low-performing schools more funding.

Following the death of George Floyd in 2020, Maine schools fully embraced equity. Every major education organization in Maine signed a diversity, equity, and inclusion statement in which they said that the education system had reinforced societal inequities and that they supported Maine educators who were “dismantling racism and inequity” in schools.³⁰ Soon, districts were hiring equity consultants to conduct diversity trainings and produce reports called “equity audits” that examined school policies and practices through an identity-based lens. These and other actions sent a strong message to students, parents, and teachers that the reduction of educational inequity was amongst Maine’s highest priorities.

Why Maine?

While many of the education issues afflicting Maine have affected the rest of America, a handful of factors specific to the state help to explain its downward trajectory:

Comparative Decline

Maine’s drop in the NAEP rankings isn’t solely due to its decline. While Maine’s scores have decreased, other states have improved. For instance, in 1998, Maine led the national average in Grade 8 reading by ten points. By 2017, this lead shrunk to four points, with Maine falling and the national average rising by three points each.³¹ Even if Maine had never had its test scores drop, it still would have declined comparatively as other states improved.

Early Adopter

Maine has tended to be an early adopter of innovative and trendy education reforms, and recent ones have been particularly bad. In the 1990s, Maine was ahead of other states in developing its own standards and standardized tests. In the 2000s, it was the first state to use the SAT as its junior-year accountability test. And while Maine was slower to sign on to Common Core State Standards, it led the nation in its efforts to implement proficiency-based education and adopt standards-based diplomas.³² The excessive social-emotional learning and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts by the Maine Department of Education in late 2020 can also be viewed as examples of Maine’s trailblazing gone awry.

Ideology

Maine is the second most ideologically liberal state in the country, with 33 percent of Mainers self-identifying as liberal. While that might not sound like much, it is high. Only 30 percent of New Yorkers and 29 percent of Californians self-identify as liberal, and their education systems have faced similar challenges.³³ Liberals are characterized by their openness to societal change and desire to reduce inequality.³⁴ Over the last four decades, Maine’s education system has become more equal and standardized, but this has come at the price of the ideologically conservative values of local control, tradition, and merit.

Media Economy

Maine’s affordable media economy has made it an easy target of corporations and social movements seeking to sway politics. An election campaign for the Maine House of Representatives could cost as little as \$5,000, while such a race in Massachusetts would be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Successful referendums in Maine have cost as little as \$3 million.³⁵ It is possible that educational decline is due in part to how inexpensive it is to influence Maine public education through politics.

Falling Birthrates

Maine has the third-lowest birth rate in the country, and the highest median age. As the number of Maine children has fallen, districts have been consolidated, and schools have closed due to too few students.³⁶ Businesses have grown anxious about a lack of skilled workers, and intervened to ensure the falling fraction of working-aged Mainers are as skilled as possible. The high age of teachers and administrators, in combination with the COVID-19 pandemic and the politicized school environment, have led many to resign or retire recently.

Changes to Family Structure

Maine has the second highest rate of babies born to unmarried mothers in New England, only behind Rhode Island. The rate has increased from 14

percent in 1980 to a high of 41 percent in 2010 and now sits at about 37 percent.³⁷ Today, 30 percent of Maine children live in homes headed by single parents.³⁸

Researchers have noted that two-parent households result in more reliable family stability, higher overall household income, additional scheduling flexibility, and important positive socialization effects for children. That is why studies have repeatedly found that children from single-parent households are more likely to suffer from behavioral issues, get in trouble in school, and struggle academically.³⁹ Thus, it is possible that the challenges faced by families with increased rates of single parenthood within Maine has contributed to at least some of Maine's educational decline.

PART I: REFORM

Maine Education Reform Act of 1984

Americans were anxious about education in the 1980s. A report by The National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" had been published in 1983 and provided evidence of a steep decline in standardized test scores and academic skills across the country. The message was clear: if the U.S. failed to deliver a better education for its students, American workers would be outcompeted by foreigners, and the country would lose its superpower status.⁴⁰

In Maine, legislators have attempted to address these concerns by putting forward a bill to restructure K-12 education. The Maine Education Reform Act of 1984 called for increased regulation of school approval and accreditation; mandatory kindergarten and additional high school graduation requirements; pay hikes and creative grants for teachers; stricter requirements for administrative positions; and statewide assessments of students' academic abilities, which led to the creation of the Maine Educational Assessment.⁴¹ Gregory Scott, the legislative liaison for the Maine Department of Education at the time, said that "this is probably the broadest one piece of legislation in the last 20 years," and that "the last time people were as excited as now was Sputnik."⁴²

The Maine Education Reform Act was followed soon after with two more laws in the same vein. *Chapter 125: School Approval Standards* increased state oversight of school performance; set maximum student-teacher ratios for classes; mandated districts evaluate pupil performance; and required comprehensive school reviews be conducted every

five years. *Chapter 127: Curriculum and Graduation Standards*, mandated schools adopt a sequenced curriculum with specified objectives for subjects in every grade; changed graduation requirements to include more math, science, and fine arts; and made guidance counselors available to all students, not just those in high school.⁴³

Social Issues Enter the Classroom

As these major educational reforms were being enacted, schools moved to address a host of new social issues that were entering the classroom. Youth drug use and alcohol consumption were on the rise, sexual activity among teenagers became more common, the threat of child abduction was increasingly publicized, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic caused parents to worry about the now fatal possibility of their child contracting a sexually transmitted disease. The Maine Department of Education, often with federal funding, told schools to hold meetings and set up programs to combat these social ills. Drug and sex education were rolled out, and emergency plans that gave students and staff a plan of action to deal with physical threats, like suspicious strangers or disgruntled students in the school, were widely adopted. As the real world began intruding into the classroom, staff began to play a more active role in safeguarding their students from outside threats and poor life decisions.⁴⁴

Maine's Common Core of Learning

In 1992, a document titled "Maine's Common Core of Learning" was mailed to educators and school board members across the state.⁴⁵ Envisioned by Commissioner of Education Eve Bither three years prior, the Common Core was sold as equipping

Mainers for success in the information-based economy of the 21st century. It contained 151 goals for student learning divided into four categories: communication, personal and global stewardship, reasoning and problem-solving, and the human record. Graduates of the program would, in the words of Commissioner Bither, be modern-day "Renaissance young men and women," equally comfortable with the principles of American government, mathematics, and Shakespeare.⁴⁶

Shortly after its release, only 38 of 184 districts had chosen to adopt the Common Core. While the document's lofty ideals appealed to some administrators, the lack of specificity made it difficult to use. "When you try to translate [Common Core] into report cards and courses, you still have arguments about who ought to be in the honors course," said one superintendent.⁴⁷ Commissioner Bither herself conceded that state officials didn't know how to help administrators implement the program.⁴⁸

Maine Learning Results

After the lukewarm response to Common Core, Maine set out to create a new set of state standards that would be easier for schools to implement. In 1993, the legislature directed the State Board of Education to assemble a task force, composed of 20 members including educators, officials, and representatives from educator and business associations. They took much of the Common Core program and, with input from over 5000 citizens and educators, transformed it into the Maine Learning Results, a set of guiding principles and content standards for career preparation, English, foreign languages, health and physical education, mathematics, science, social studies, and visual and performing arts.⁴⁹

While the Learning Results dictated the knowledge and skills students would need to master, they did not directly specify which curricula or teaching

methods should be used to impart them. Instead, it was left up to local school boards, administrators, and teachers.⁵⁰ In 1996, after weeks of debate in the House and aggressive lobbying by some of Maine's biggest corporations who wanted more skilled workers, Governor Angus King signed a heavily revised set of the Learning Results into law.⁵¹

In a 1997 interview, Commissioner of Education Duke Albanese explained the philosophy behind the new Learning Results. While American schools had been criticized for expecting little of students and focusing only on the top 20 percent, Maine's new approach would hold every student to a higher standard:

Traditionally, America's approach to education has been about sorting and grouping kids based on early and varying expectations. Learning Results are contrary to this whole notion. They focus on age groups and all kids learning at high levels.

Some say this is crazy, that "those" kids can't do this. We respond by saying Learning Results will not redefine tomorrow what high school kids need to know. Instead, they are about starting when children are inducted into school and having high expectations for children all the way through their school experiences. Some children will demonstrate their learning sooner. For others, it will take longer to demonstrate the literacy levels that Learning Results set forth.⁵²

The Commissioner went on to detail the problems he hoped the Learning Results would solve: There were great inequities in funding and teacher quality between schools across Maine, students graduating with a high school diploma were enrolling in and completing college at low rates, and employers were having trouble finding young, skilled workers.⁵³

Academic Achievement

One problem Mainers did not have to worry about at this time was academic achievement, an area in which Maine's students were leading the nation. On

the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress, Maine 4th graders scored first among the states in math and second in reading. In 1996, both 4th and 8th grade Maine students scored first in math, and 8th graders scored first in science. In all subjects, Maine ranked well above the national average and substantially above the rest of New England. Maine's success, and the formability of its education system, was acknowledged nationwide.⁵⁴

One might look at such illustrious achievements and conclude that whatever education system was producing them ought to be preserved, not tampered with. But Commissioner Albanese believed Maine was ahead in test scores precisely because it was, and for a long time had been, a leader in education. To equip students with the skills to compete in an increasingly global economy, the Maine Learning Results were needed:

The fact we're doing quite well in a number of areas does build an argument for those people who say we're already doing well enough. They ask: Why do we need Learning Results? Why move forward? My argument is that complacency is a real danger. Its ugly head will haunt you if you fail to take the long view. We would be in real trouble if we simply thought about today.

Learning Results are about the long view. When I meet with commissioners from other states, they want to talk about Maine. States like Massachusetts and Maryland now are signing contracts to do the same kinds of assessment we've been doing for twelve years. In many cases, they're just beginning to articulate standards. Quite frankly, we have an advantage and we're looking to see how Maine kids perform against international competition.⁵⁵

Impact of Reform

By 1999, the Maine Educational Assessment had been modified to measure achievement on the Maine Learning Results, and all students in grades 4, 8, and

11 were being tested with it.⁵⁶ Many teachers were unhappy. The state was now telling them what standards to teach to and how to measure their success as teachers. Faculty meetings, teacher trainings, and professional development programs were now focused on "aligning instruction with the Maine Learning Results."⁵⁷ Maine educators, who according to survey research were among the most involved and committed in the nation, grew opposed to the state's intrusion into their classrooms.⁵⁸

After the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was reauthorized by Congress in 1990, disabled students from special institutions were gradually brought into normal public schools. Many were educated in the same classes, supported by a growing number of teachers' aids and ed techs. To deal with the expanding range of abilities and aptitudes within regular classes, many students were pulled out for speech therapy, special education, gifted services, small group work, and other additional instruction. Consequently, teachers had to help students catch up on material they had missed when pulled out of regular classes and became frustrated by the fact that they could no longer expect to have their entire class in attendance when delivering lessons.⁵⁹

Despite these centralizing and standardizing reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, there was still a great deal of local variation among Maine schools. Curriculum was vetted by school boards with help from teachers. Controversial issues, such as sex education, were dealt with transparently.⁶⁰ The Maine Learning Results and Maine Educational Assessment reduced school autonomy, but by no means eradicated it. Schools had a wide range of disciplinary policies, some strict, some lenient. Schools varied widely in their funding, which the legislature tried unsuccessfully to address with school finance laws in 1985 and 1995.⁶¹

PART II: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND (2002-2008)

The No Child Left Behind Act

After campaigning on bipartisan education reform, President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law in January of 2002. Though Republicans had historically opposed the federal government's involvement in education at the state level, fears of international competition and declining test scores, in combination with lobbying on behalf of big businesses and Civil Rights groups, led them to reconsider.⁶²

No Child Left Behind was designed to hold states accountable for their schools' performance, and in doing so close gaps between high- and low-performing states, schools, and student groups. All public schools receiving federal funding were now required to administer a yearly standardized test to their students. If they failed to make adequate yearly progress, defined as continuous improvement year over year, on the test, their state's Department of Education would sanction them. Schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress two years in a row had to allow their students to transfer to a better school nearby. Four years in a row, and a school could have its staff replaced or curriculum changed. Six years, and the school would be closed, turned into a private or charter school, or commandeered by the state's Department of Education.⁶³

Data collection was integral to No Child Left Behind. School districts were required to collect and present data for six student categories: race, economic disadvantage, disability, limited English proficiency, migrant status, and gender. Data on the experience and credentials of teachers was also collected, to facilitate the transition towards all teachers being

highly qualified (bachelor's degree + certification + subject matter expertise), a goal that now had to be met by the 2005-06 school year. Districts were also classified by socioeconomic status, with the law mandating that highly qualified teachers be evenly split between rich and poor schools. Across the country, teachers started spending more of their time measuring and recording the demographics and academic progress of their students.⁶⁴

Maine's Response to No Child Left Behind

In 2003, PBS released a special on Maine's reaction to No Child Left Behind. State Rep. Peggy Rotundo (D) questioned why Maine should embrace the new requirements given that it already had good schools, high standards, and leading test scores. Lewiston principal Tom Hood said the act would add extra stress to teachers and staff and worsen the school climate. Commissioner of Education Susan Gendron said that the requirement to source highly qualified teachers would be difficult for the 50 percent of Maine schools which were rural. Rep. Tom Allen (D), who voted for No Child Left Behind in Congress and then changed his mind about it, said that its emphasis on competition between schools made no sense in Maine where most districts had only one high school in them and no choices or alternatives.

It seemed to many that Maine had independently made the important reforms No Child Left Behind was trying to instate nationwide, and so the program offered little in the way of benefits while posing a threat to rural districts. Some reformers who had pushed for radical changes to Maine education now joined traditionalists in fighting to preserve Maine's autonomy.⁶⁵

Despite opposing No Child Left Behind, many in the Maine education establishment agreed with the philosophy behind it. They believed that with investment and accountability, every student could become a high achiever. Politically, the act had something for everyone. Republicans liked the idea of holding educators' feet to the fire through competition, and Democrats liked the idea that all children could excel academically with enough support. The act stipulated that by 2014, 100 percent of children would be proficient in reading, math, and science; a lofty goal that was just far away enough to seem attainable through incremental progress.⁶⁶

Changes to School Leadership and Teaching Practices

Prior to No Child Left Behind, superintendents were only expected to manage their districts. They hired and fired, enforced school board policies, dealt with difficult students and employees, and oversaw financial operations. But with the introduction of No Child Left Behind, superintendents took on a new task: leading their district. It was no longer sufficient for a superintendent to simply follow the school board's orders and make sure schools ran smoothly. They now had to create and implement a plan for raising the test scores of all their students, year over year, for the foreseeable future. Superintendents became heavily involved in decisions around curriculum and instructional materials, which previously were left to school boards and teachers. Their workload has increased dramatically as they have spent more time communicating and developing their district's vision, reporting student achievement, revising professional development programs, and collecting and utilizing data to improve instruction.⁶⁷

Maine teachers also saw their job change considerably. No Child Left Behind assumed that students and schools would improve year over year, but there are real limits to how much a student or school can improve. At the time, teachers viewed it

as their job to teach a lesson, and students' job to master the material. No Child Left Behind changed that and made teachers responsible for not just teaching, but ensuring students tested well. Teachers were confused about why they were being judged on the academic success of their students, an outcome which they had only modest control over, given that they could not control their students' work ethic, intelligence, socioeconomic status, or family circumstances, all of which affect academic performance. Indeed, decades of education research demonstrate that schools and teachers account for only 10 to 20 percent of the variation in academic achievement between students.⁶⁸

Professional development for teachers was now focused on how to improve test scores and comply with the new changes. With so much on the line financially, teachers were incentivized to spend more time on math and reading and less time on subjects such as social studies and foreign languages. The teaching of core subjects was geared towards mastery of test material over deeper forms of learning and understanding. Many grew disillusioned. "The idea of teaching looks less attractive with No Child Left Behind," remarked one Maine teacher at the time.⁶⁹

These changes hit teachers in Maine's rural districts the hardest. In 2004, 53 percent of Maine's students lived in rural areas. Rural schools tended to have less human capital, more students with disabilities, and fewer dollars to spend on implementing the required changes. They were more likely to fail to make adequate yearly progress than urban schools, which led to sanctions from the Maine Department of Education and hurt their reputations. These outcomes were difficult to control, as one good student being absent or a bad one bombing a test could undermine an entire school's adequate yearly progress in small districts. Many of the best teachers left and went to teach in urban schools where students tested better and there was a steady stream of funding.⁷⁰

Impact on Test Scores

While it failed to substantially improve reading, the No Child Left Behind Act was associated with lasting gains in math achievement.⁷¹ Figure 17 illustrates that in 2000, two years before the passage of the law,

25 percent of Maine 4th graders and 30 percent of Maine 8th graders were proficient or advanced in math. By 2009, 45 percent of 4th graders and 35 percent of 8th graders were proficient or advanced.

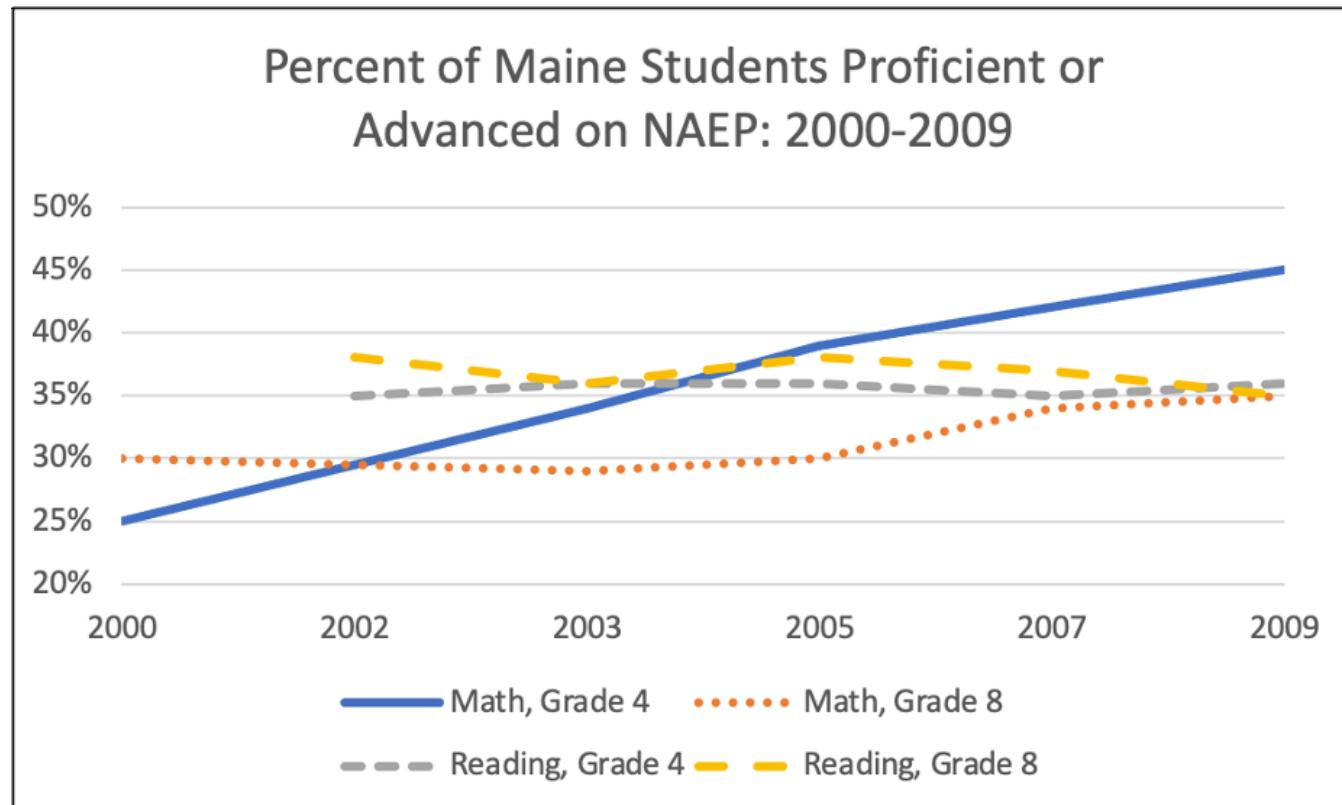


Figure 17. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Nevertheless, these gains came at a cost. The managerial and pedagogical changes necessary to implement No Child Left Behind made education more standardized and bureaucratic, leading teachers to have less control over their classrooms and administrators' responsibilities to balloon.

Postsecondary Education Reform in Maine

Blue Ribbon Commission on Postsecondary Educational Attainment

In 2001, the year before No Child Left Behind was enacted, the Maine Legislature established the Blue Ribbon Commission on Postsecondary Educational Attainment. The Commission was created to investigate the impact of low levels of college attendance on the Maine economy.

After conducting research for a year, they published a report that argued postsecondary education was the only way to guarantee participation in the

modern economy and that higher education had become a prerequisite for a middle-class life. Despite its high test scores, Maine lagged behind the rest of New England in educational attainment and economic prosperity. The report recommended Maine invest in career planning, financial aid, and quality college programs so more students would enroll.⁷²

The Blue Ribbon Commission report made no mention of vocational education other than to say that the kinds of students who took vocational education courses in high school were less likely to go to college because of social, financial, and family barriers. This reinforced the common view at the time that the trades were less worthy of aspiring to than white collar professions, for which a college degree was increasingly necessary.⁷³

SAT Adopted as Accountability Test

In 2005, Maine became the first state to adopt the SAT as its junior year accountability test for No Child Left Behind. The act required every state to select a test and give it to all students to determine whether they were making adequate yearly progress improvements year over year. Since Maine, like other states, was compelled to do so, and was also trying to boost college enrollment, it chose the SAT, which fulfilled both purposes.⁷⁴

After all high school juniors were required to take the SAT, Maine witnessed a 10 percent increase in college enrollment among those who would not have taken the test were it not mandated, and a 3 percent increase for students overall.⁷⁵ At the same time, the new testing requirements were criticized for being unsparing: every student, including those in special education, now had to take the SAT in order to measure that school's adequate yearly progress, forcing many who would undoubtedly fail to study for and write the test. As one Maine superintendent put it: "It is inappropriate for a populous to conclude that little Johnny or Mary who is mildly retarded will achieve at math at the same level as little Mike or Annie who are geniuses and can do calculus. It's

putting them on the same level and that's absurd."⁷⁶

Act To Prepare All Maine Students for Postsecondary Education

In 2007, Maine passed "An Act To Prepare All Maine Students for Postsecondary Education, Career and Citizenship," intended to "ensure that each student [had] an equitable opportunity to achieve the State's learning results and to graduate ready for college, career and citizenship."⁷⁷ The bill modified accreditation requirements for schools and required them to award high school diplomas based on whether students passed assessments of the Maine Learning Results by 2010.

Most significantly, it compelled schools to eliminate "tracking and ability grouping of students as a means of organizing students for learning."⁷⁸ However, it also included a mandate to provide accelerated learning (i.e. gifted instruction) in an alternative environment to meet the needs of individual students.⁷⁹ In practice, these changes meant that schools would have modified learning for underperforming children (special education,) and overperforming children (accelerated learning), with all other children lumped together in the middle.

Response to Intervention

After the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act created a need for proactive, rather than reactive, academic interventions, a model of multi-tiered instruction called response to intervention became widespread in American schools for younger grades.⁸⁰

Response to intervention involves grouping students into one of three tiers, illustrated in Figure 18, based on their academic performance. Students start in Tier 1, where they receive normal

instruction. Those who fall behind move to Tier 2 and are given evidence-based interventions to catch up. Students who continue to struggle move to Tier 3, where they receive intense individualized

instruction. This provides a systematic way of tracking student progress and helps to stop kids from “falling through the cracks” and requiring special education or individualized education plans.

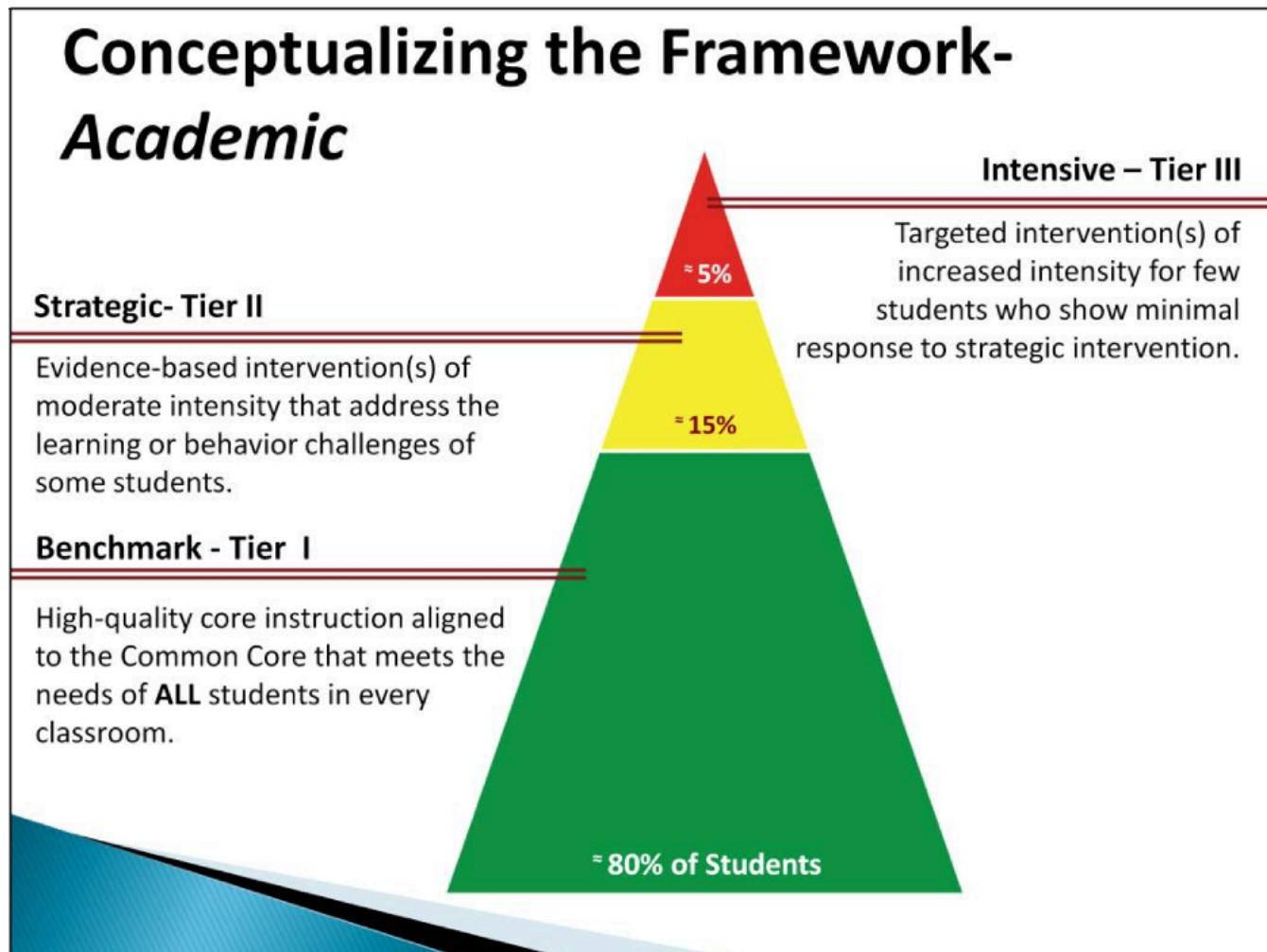


Figure 18. Source: “Response to Intervention Guidelines.” 2012. Maine Department of Education.

As a response to the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Maine ruled that all schools would have to provide support for students not meeting state standards by 2012. Schools began adopting response to intervention programs as a means of complying with this mandate.⁸¹

Response to Intervention for Behavior

Maine's response to intervention programs soon expanded to include student behavior, leading to the creation of the multi-tiered behavior model depicted in Figure 19. Students started in Tier 1, moved to

Tier 2 if they displayed behavioral challenges, where they received behavioral interventions, and moved to Tier 3 if their behavior got worse, where they received individualized help.

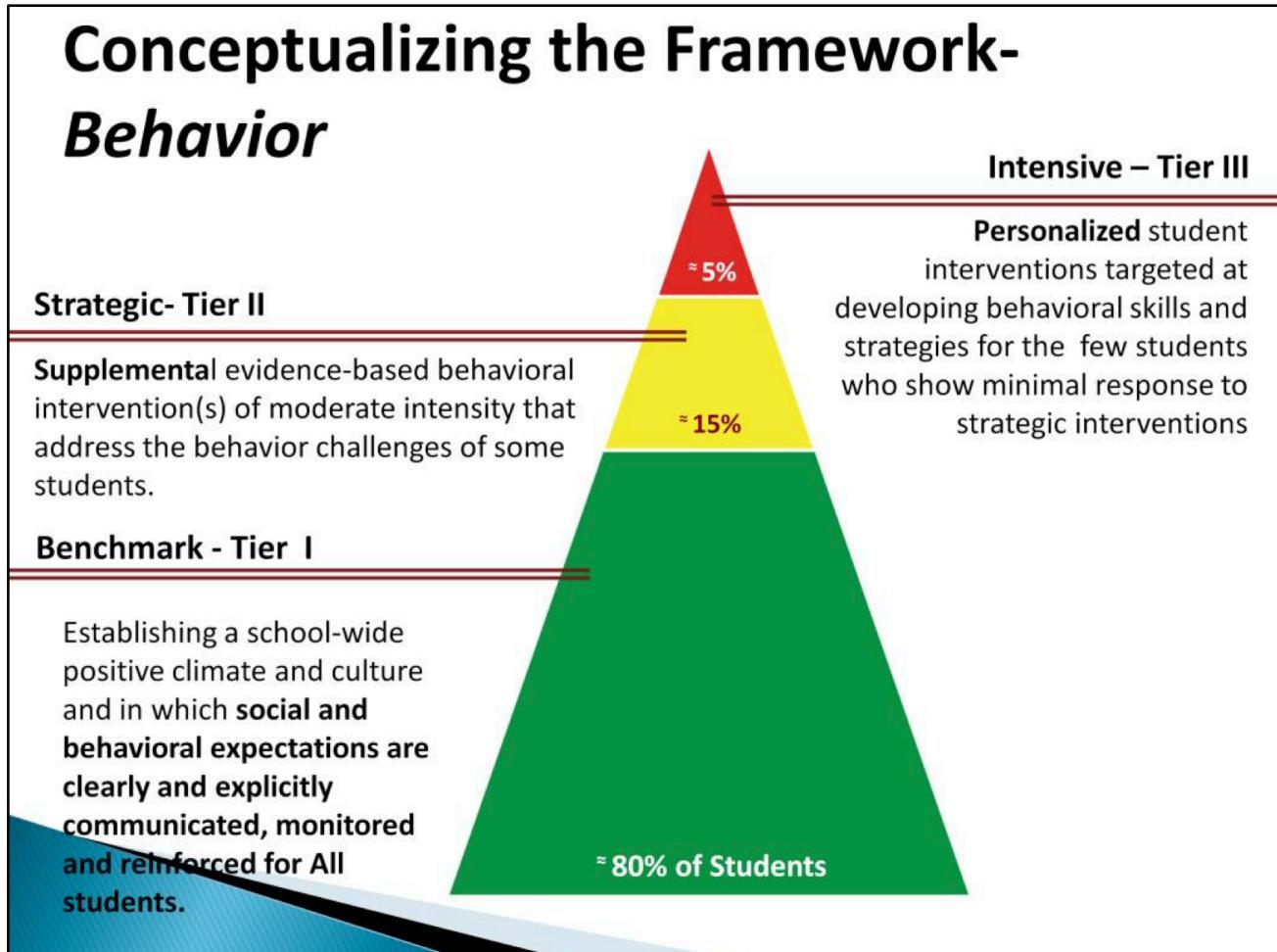


Figure 19. Source: "Response to Intervention Guidelines." 2012. Maine Department of Education.

Impact of Response to Intervention

In its initial implementation, response to intervention functioned as a way to stop students from falling behind. Teachers at that time often did not see it as their job to reteach material students had failed to grasp in class, and response to intervention pushed them to spend more with students who needed to be taught part of a lesson again or in a different way. But over time, it began to be implemented more heavy-handedly. Data was collected on every student tracking which tier they were in based on their academic progress. In some schools, students in tiers 2 or 3 were pulled out of

less important classes to catch up. Some schools adopted a daily response to intervention period in which teachers caught their tier 2 and 3 students up to speed while everyone else did homework or read.

While one can appreciate how these changes may have improved student learning and retention, they undermined teachers' ability to control their classroom time. Here is the testimony of one Maine teacher interviewed for this report, describing how response to intervention made it difficult to run her class:

By nine o'clock, before we'd even been there for an hour, you'd have lots of pullout groups. You'd have one teacher come in and take four or five kids to go across the hallway to do their literacy group. Or you'd have another teacher come and get their ELL [English Language Learner] kids. Even ELL, you'd have your 1s, your 2s, your 3s, depending on what language they would speak. So, you know, they might come and get your ELL 1s or your ELL 3s. There were lots of other kinds of support services, like social groups.

People would start coming in throughout the morning to take different kids out for different things. So you almost never would, at least I would almost never, have my full class together at any time, which is always a challenge...

My personal view was that there was a huge focus on bringing the "kids in the red" [lowest tier] up to yellow, while very little attention was paid to the kids already in "the green."

Another issue with response to intervention was that it increased the time it took to get a child an individualized education plan or be designated as needing special education. Even if a child was obviously going to struggle in a standard classroom or without personalized supports, that child could not be classified properly until they had failed through the response to intervention model. So while the model caught children who might have ended up in special education unnecessarily, it increased the time it took for kids with the worst issues to get the supports they needed.

Maine School Finance Reform

One of the most significant changes to the politics of Maine education during this period was the Maine School Finance and Tax Reform Carry-Over Measure of 2004. A referendum that passed 55-45, it required the State of Maine to pay 55 percent of K-12

education costs and 100 percent of special education costs by 2009. Prior to the passage of the measure, there was no statutory requirement for the state to fund a specific percentage of public education costs.⁸²

The reform was backed by the group Citizens Who Support Maine's Public Schools, a "passthrough organization" that transmitted money from the National Education Association and was run out of the Maine Education Association's headquarters in Augusta.⁸³ Although it was intended to make education more equitable by reducing the tax burden on cities and towns, few municipalities cut taxes as a result.⁸⁴

After the referendum was passed, debates over education spending in Maine became more rhetorical than substantive. Changes in education spending at one level, such as an increase in federal or municipal dollars, made it incumbent on the state to increase its share of the spending accordingly so as not to fall below 55 percent. And those who wanted to cut the education budget were attacked for failing to fund education at 55 percent.⁸⁵

District Consolidation

As education costs shifted to the state, Augusta became more concerned with how funds were being spent. By 2007, Governor John Baldacci wanted to cut the state education budget due to what he saw as egregious overspending and a lack of financial accountability. 81 percent of schools had gone over budget on essential programs and services, and schools were \$132 million over what their funding formula prescribed. Governor Baldacci wanted districts over the limit to return 90 percent of their new state education aid to taxpayers. The Maine Education Association protested, saying budgets and funding formulas did not capture the full cost of running schools, but Baldacci was adamant on cutting costs.⁸⁶

The Baldacci government proposed an ambitious plan called “Local Schools, Regional Support.” It involved consolidating Maine’s 290 districts into 26 Regional School Units (RSUs), and spending the savings, estimated at \$250 million in the first three years, on school improvement. Districts with fewer than 2,500 students would have to join another district, with some exceptions made for high-performing and isolated districts. It would terminate 152 superintendents and the members of those 290 school boards, replacing them with 26 central offices run by a superintendent, administrators, and a 15-person regionally elected school board. Consolidation, the government argued, would save time and money, and make it easier to implement new strategies for school achievement.⁸⁷ “By having only 26 districts rather than 290, we could meet on a monthly basis with all the superintendents and with all the curriculum coordinators to talk about our standards and best practices, and to get agreement on what our academic outcomes need to be,” remarked Education Commissioner Susan Gendron.⁸⁸ In addition, the number of school-aged individuals in Maine had been projected to decline from 198,000 in 2007 to 182,000 by 2010, with further declines into the conceivable future, so it made sense to have fewer schools for fewer students.⁸⁹

The plan was criticized by the Maine Education Association and educators for undermining local agency and being too top-down. Small-town parents were the most concerned, as some would be required to drive as much as an hour away to visit their central regional office under the new arrangement.⁹⁰ When Commissioner Gendron toured schools to discuss the plan, she was met with hostility from parents, teachers, and superintendents who accused her and the Governor of making radical changes that would ignore their districts’ unique needs.⁹¹ A group called “Maine Coalition to Save Schools” tried to repeal consolidation twice through ballot referendum but failed, while a PAC called “Maine People for Improved School Education” lobbied in favor of

maintaining consolidation.⁹² The public was split on the issue, with 51 percent favoring a reduction in school administrative units if it meant lower taxes.⁹³

Impact of District Consolidation

Two years after the plan had been put forward, 84 percent of schools had either complied with or been exempted from consolidation. 98 districts averaging 500 students each had been consolidated into 26 districts with an average of 2,100 students. 126 rural districts, however, had refused to comply with the law and faced potential cuts to their funding as a result.⁹⁴ Many of the schools that had been exempted from consolidation were allowed to do so because they developed “alternative plans” that the Commissioner of Education approved. These tended to be “larger cities like Portland, college towns like Brunswick, Lewiston, and Farmington, and expensive communities along the southern coast like Biddeford, Scarborough, and Yarmouth.”⁹⁵ So while consolidation did occur, it did not go according to plan, and the schools most negatively affected by it were rural and lower-income.

The effects of consolidation can still be felt today. Superintendents in larger consolidated districts often require large teams of assistant superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and other administrators to fulfill their many obligations. Parents are less likely to personally know other parents, teachers, and administrators in their district. Since 2012, 33 towns withdrew from their school district and 40 are considering withdrawal or tried to and failed.⁹⁶ Commenting on why consolidation had unraveled, University of Maine Professor of Education Gordon Donaldson said that “In Maine, it’s always going to come down to the local unit and the local community.”⁹⁷

PART III: STANDARDS BASED EDUCATION

Race to the Top

While President Bush's education policy emphasized strict accountability, President Obama campaigned on a flexible approach to improving schooling with more carrots and fewer sticks. He promised to increase education funding by \$18 billion a year, amend the No Child Left Behind Act, hire more teachers, and double spending on charter schools.

After being elected, President Obama passed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which included a competitive grant to the U.S. Department of Education called "Race to the Top." The program set up the infrastructure to award large grants to applying states based on a points system. Points were awarded for demonstrating commitment to goals such as raising achievement and closing gaps, adopting common standards and assessments, implementing state-wide data systems, improving educator effectiveness, and turning around low-achieving schools.⁹⁸

Maine's Race to The Top Application

A majority of states applied for the first round of Race to the Top funding in 2010. Maine put an application together, emphasizing a new focus on "the individual student" with promises to implement "personalized learning" (students move through grades at their own pace); "performance-based learning" (more consistent use of curriculum and standards); "systems of learning support" (a "safety net" for students to keep them on track); "great teachers and leaders" (new individual-level accountability assessments); and "using data" (build a more comprehensive data collection system).⁹⁹ Only 38 percent of school districts and 12 percent of

teachers unions signed on to the application, but the 82 districts that did contained 75 percent of students in the state.¹⁰⁰ While Maine's application was rejected, likely due to their hesitancy to adopt charter schools and hold teachers accountable for student achievement, acting Commissioner of Education Angela Flaherty said the application would serve as a blueprint for the state's education policy going forward.¹⁰¹

Teacher Evaluation in Maine

Race to the Top rewarded states for implementing systems of teacher evaluation and improving the performance of teachers and principals. Influenced by the program, Maine passed an "Act To Ensure Effective Teaching and School Leadership" in 2012, which required districts to "develop and implement comprehensive performance evaluation and professional growth systems for teachers and principals."¹⁰² Districts implemented these systems and used them to evaluate teachers and improve their teaching. However, many of these systems adopted to evaluate teacher effectiveness did so less based on whether students enjoyed the class or how much they learned, but on whether the students and teachers mastered skills outlined by the system.

For instance, the Marzano model of teaching effectiveness, which is popular in Maine, requires teachers to have their students start by mastering low-level skills like "think, pair, share" and "group research" before moving on to higher-level skills like "deep thinking" and "analysis." Teachers too must start with lower-level skills, like "communicating learning goals" and "tracking student progress," before moving on to higher skills, like "displaying

objectivity and control” and “probing incorrect answers with low-expectancy students” (see Figure 20).¹⁰³ Progression through these skills is facilitated through iObservation, a software where teachers report and reflect on their progression and administrators evaluate them.¹⁰⁴ While it is possible that some students have benefited from teachers

being evaluated this way, several teachers interviewed for this report said that it has the effect of “dumbing down” the classroom, as only after demonstration of basic skills can students and teachers move on to higher levels of learning and classroom management.

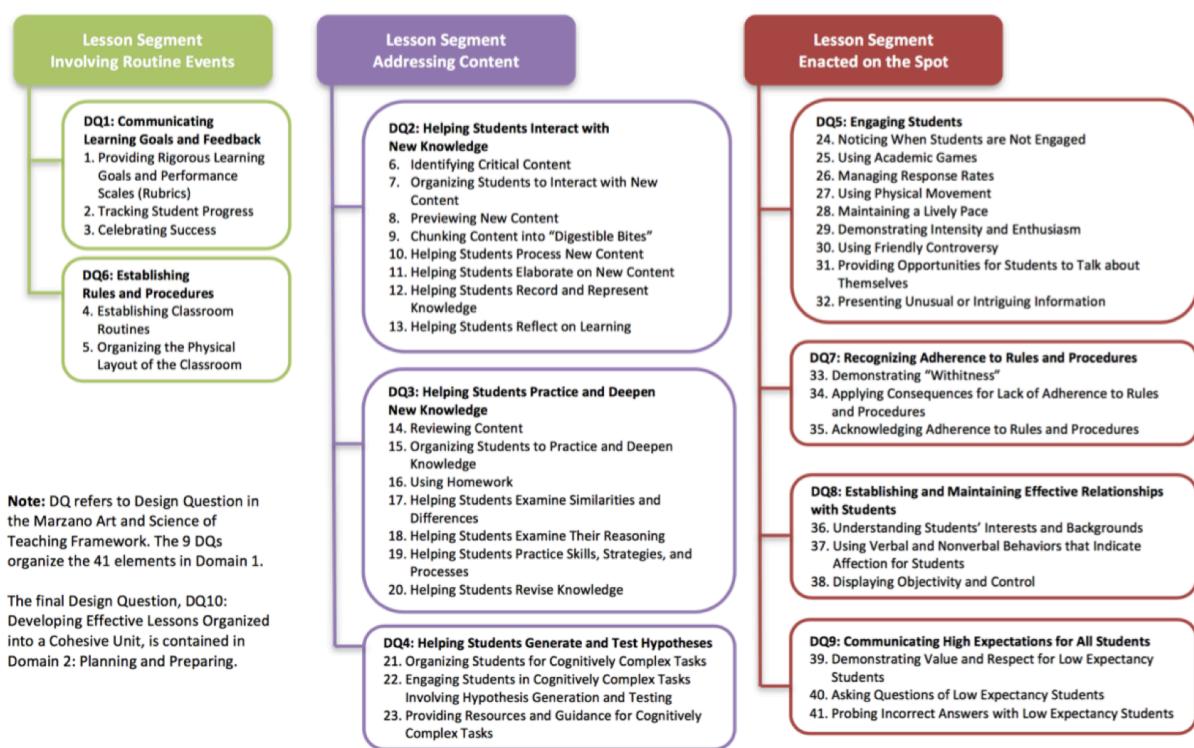
The Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model Learning Map

2014 Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model Learning Map



Domain 1: Classroom Strategies and Behaviors

Domain 1 is based on the Art and Science of Teaching Framework and identifies the 41 elements or instructional categories that happen in the classroom. The 41 instructional categories are organized into 9 Design Questions (DQs) and further grouped into 3 Lesson Segments to define the Observation and Feedback Protocol.



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Figure 20. Source: "The Marzano Teacher Evaluation Model. 2013. Learning Sciences International."

Over time, Maine’s teacher evaluation grew further disconnected from achievement. In 2019, the legislature passed “An Act To Amend Teacher Evaluation Requirements” which removed any requirement to base teacher evaluations on improvements in grades or test scores, and required districts to form teacher evaluation committees, a majority of which must be teachers, to regularly review and revise evaluation methods.¹⁰⁵ This was

described as “a huge step forward” by education journalist Peter Greene, who further argued that “test-centered teacher evaluation” was more harmful than helpful because it led teachers to hyper-focus on raising scores at the expense of being better teachers in other ways, with little evidence of benefits to students.¹⁰⁶

Common Core

One of the ways states could earn points through Race to the Top was by adopting the Common Core State Standards (different from Maine's Common Core of Learning from 1992). The Common Core standards were created by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. They believed that most states set their standards too low and needed a new set of universal standards to catch up to other countries outcompeting America in international standardized tests. So they developed a set of national standards that were easy for parents and teachers to understand and imparted knowledge and skills applicable to college and careers.¹⁰⁷

Common Core was seen as a 21st-century update to older, more traditional forms of teaching. The standards emphasized real understanding over rote learning and memorization. Writing assignments were less focused on personal narratives (i.e. "what I did over summer vacation") and more on critical thinking and evidence-based arguments. Math class covered fewer topics in greater depth and focused on new visual ways of solving problems, which was somewhat controversial as parents had never learned the new problem-solving techniques necessary to help their kids.¹⁰⁸

Maine Adopts Common Core

In 2011 under Governor Paul LePage, Maine became the 42nd state to adopt Common Core as its state standards. More specifically, the Maine Learning Results were updated to include Common Core as the "college and career readiness standards for English language arts and math."¹⁰⁹ According to the Maine Department of Education, by the 2012-13 academic year classroom instruction in all Maine schools would be based on Common Core standards, and by 2014-15 the Maine Educational Assessment and other standardized tests would be replaced by new Common Core-aligned assessments created by a 31-state group called the Smarter Balanced

Assessment Consortium. The Maine Department of Education said these changes would benefit Maine because they set higher standards than the Maine Learning Results; would allow Maine to share resources, materials, and expertise with other participating states; would introduce "world-class professional development" for teachers; allow Maine to share the cost of standardized test creation with most other states; and open the possibility of direct comparison with other states on the same standards and assessments.¹¹⁰

By 2013, however, Governor LePage had soured on Common Core, and feared that the standards were part of a larger attempt by the federal government to control education policy across the country. To prevent Maine from being influenced by federal initiatives, he signed an executive order prohibiting the Maine Department of Education from adopting federal education standards, curricula, or instructional approaches, applying for grants that require adopting federal standards, and sharing students' personal information, such as religious belief, political partisanship, or psychometric data, with the federal government.¹¹¹ The Smarter Balanced tests, after being piloted in 2012, were canceled in 2015 because math and literacy experts deemed them "far above grade level" and "developmentally inappropriate."¹¹² They were replaced with a new Common Core-aligned version of the Maine Educational Assessment.¹¹³ Groups such as No Common Core Maine and the Maine Equal Rights Center went further, and tried unsuccessfully to repeal Common Core through referendum.¹¹⁴ Today, Common Core is still integrated into the math and English Maine Learning Results.

Impact of Common Core on Test Scores

When the NAEP results for 2015 were released, educators around the country were shocked. Math and reading scores, which had been rising for over a decade, had fallen. Many attributed the fall to how difficult it must have been for states to implement the new changes to teaching and testing associated

with Common Core, expecting a rebound once schools adjusted that has yet to come.¹¹⁵ The Brookings Institution, which once championed Common Core, conceded in 2021 that “no convincing evidence exists that the standards had a significant, positive impact on student achievement.”¹¹⁶ As seen in Figure 21, the percent of grade 4 students in

Maine proficient or advanced in math plummeted after the introduction of Common Core. Grade 8 math fell as well, while reading proficiency remained fairly stagnant.

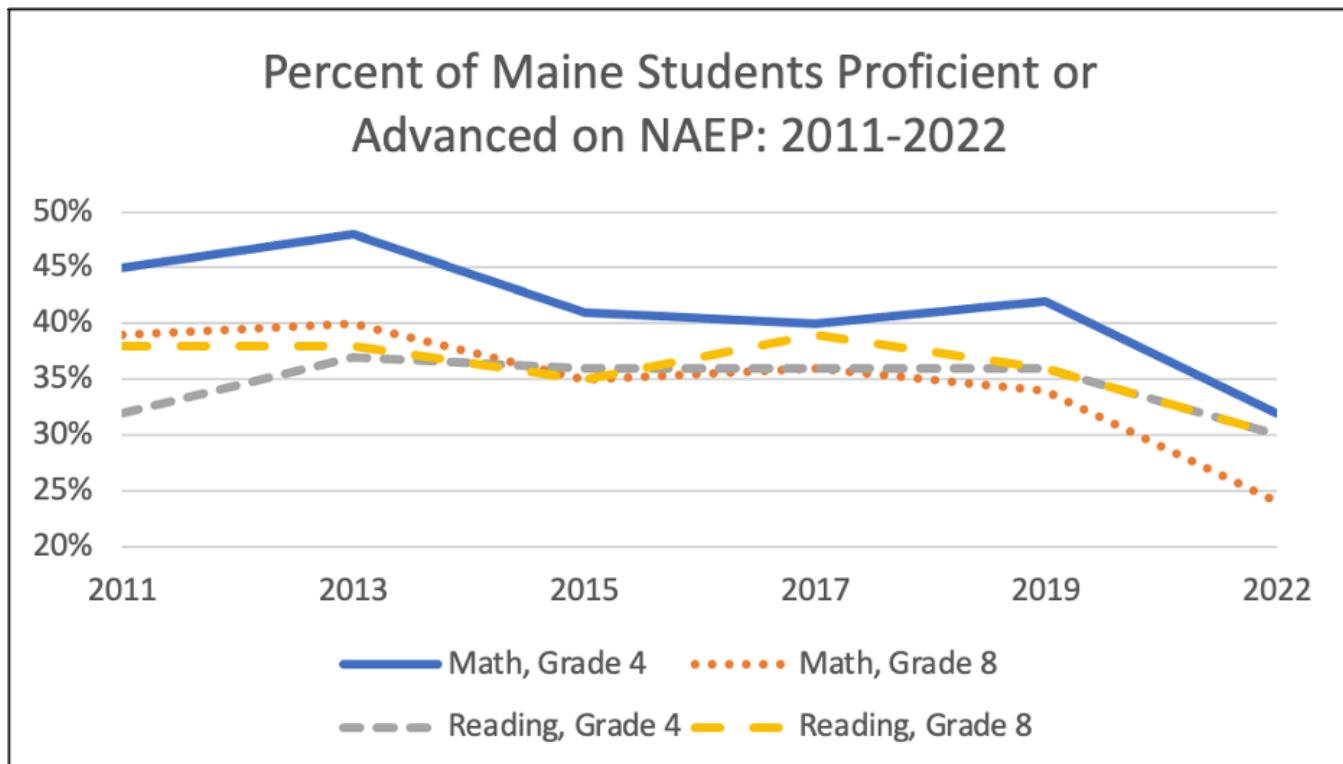


Figure 21. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Proficiency-Based Education

In 2012, Maine passed “An Act to Prepare Maine People for the Future Economy,” which required all schools in Maine to switch from credit-based diplomas to proficiency-based diplomas.¹¹⁷ A credit-based diploma is awarded to a student for earning a certain number of credits in English, math, science, and social studies classes, and a certain number of credits in electives like art, music, or foreign languages. A proficiency-based diploma, by contrast, is awarded to a student who demonstrates proficiency in skills or knowledge areas outlined in state standards. For instance, a student may have to

demonstrate proficiency in specific math skills, like knowing how to make statistical inferences based on data, and English skills, like using textual evidence to support an argument, to graduate.

There were two main reasons for the switch to proficiency-based diplomas, and consequently, proficiency-based education. The first was a desire for a more personalized education experience, in which students could move as fast or slow as they wanted to, with the teacher acting more as facilitator or tutor, and less as a traditional instructor. Here is a description of a proficiency-based math class:

In a math classroom inside Monmouth Academy in the RSU 2 district, 20 students, ranging from freshmen to seniors, sat in clusters of four, working independently on small dry erase boards. Some were still studying geometry, others had advanced to Algebra II. One group was just starting on probability.

Elizabeth Ross, a ninth-year teacher in the district, buzzed between them, stopping to show two juniors, Violette Beaulieu and Hannah Levesque, how a parabola can dip from positive to negative.

When they understood the concept, Ross moved on, giving another group a lesson in operations with square roots. Then she moved on again.¹¹⁸

This way of teaching gave students the freedom to move at their own pace, but differed significantly from a traditional classroom experience. Teachers could no longer just stand at the board and teach, they now had to work one-on-one with students and track where each was on every standard. School became more forgiving, as students who had bad weeks or months for whatever reason could catch up quicker once they felt better, instead of having the scores they received during a bad period define them. This came at the cost of a unified classroom in which teachers could teach everyone all at once and

students would work on the same problems at the same time.

The second reason for the switch to proficiency-based education was the belief that credit-based diplomas were difficult to compare state to state, district to district, and even school to school. If students attending top schools were receiving a higher standard of education, then their diplomas meant more on the job market and in college applications. Requiring every student to demonstrate they were proficient in the same skills would bring greater equity to diplomas, ensuring graduates were taken seriously wherever they had attended.¹¹⁹

However, the ways in which a student's proficiency on a given standard was determined ended up varying widely between classrooms. Some teachers judged proficiency based on traditional exams, others portfolios of work, and yet others final projects and performances. Some teachers let students retake the same test repeatedly until they demonstrated proficiency, and others stopped grading homework and classroom altogether because they were not direct tests of proficiency. "Each teacher has their own system," remarked a 12th grader at Gray-New Gloucester High School.¹²⁰ Still, proponents of proficiency-based education argued these standards-based evaluations were still

fairer and more objective than allowing a teacher to judge an A, B, or F by his own standards.¹²¹

Standards-Based Grading

As Maine districts started to adopt proficiency-based education, many replaced their A to F grading system with a new 1 to 4 grading system called “standards-

based grading.” If a student was proficient in a standard, they received a 3. If they were approaching a standard, they received a 2. If they exceeded proficiency in a standard, they received a 4. And if they were not close to meeting the standard, they received a 1. This made it easier to collect and compare students’ mastery of standards across

Name: _____	4 Exceeding Standard	3 Meeting Standard	2 Approaching Standard	1 Not Meeting Standard
Persuasive Rubric				
Intro Students will be able to produce clear and coherent writing, in which the development organization and style are appropriate to the audience. (CCS 6.4)	The claim is clearly written. Essay uses questions and/or a personal story to hook the reader.	The claim is clearly written.	The claim is not clearly written.	The claim is missing.
Reasons Students will be able to write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. (CCS 6.1 a-e)	Essay includes 3 or more clear reasons and a counter-claim.	Essay includes 3 or more clear reasons.	Essay includes less than three reasons and/or reasons are unclear.	Essay includes no reasons or reasons are unconnected to the claim.
Conclusion Students will be able to produce clear and coherent writing, in which the development organization and style are appropriate to the audience. (CCS 6.4)	Conclusion summarizes all reasons given, restates the claim, and has a call to action.	Conclusion summarizes all reasons given, restates the claim.	Conclusion restates the claim.	Conclusion fails to restate the claim.
Structure Students will be able to produce clear and coherent writing, in which the development organization and style are appropriate to the audience. (CCS 6.4)	N/A	All paragraphs are at least 4 or more sentences long.	One or more paragraphs are less than 4 sentences long.	Essay is not written in paragraph form.
Transitions Students will be able to produce clear and coherent writing, in which the development organization and style are appropriate to the audience. (CCS 6.4)	Essay includes transitions for every reason, the conclusion, and shift in examples/thinking.	Essay includes transitions for every reason and the conclusion.	Essay is missing a transition.	Essay is missing more than one transition.
Spelling/Grammar Students will be able to plan, edit, re-write, revise, and re-approach their writing. (CCS 6.5)	The story has correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Less than 3 mistakes.	There are few spelling, grammatical or punctuation errors which slow the reader down and make it difficult to understand. 4-6 errors.	There several spelling, grammatical or punctuation errors in the story, which makes reading and understanding it challenging. 7-9 errors.	Story has many spelling, grammar and punctuation errors make reading impossible/very frustrating. 9 or more errors.

Figure 22. Source: Mr. Watts. “Persuasive Essay Rubric (Common Core Aligned).” Teachers Pay Teachers.

schools and over time. An example rubric that uses standards-based grading is depicted in Figure 22.

Under this new 1 to 4 grading system, 4s were given out rarely to those who exceeded the grade level standard, such as by answering a bonus question or doing extra work. Many students graded this way stopped trying to excel in school, as they realized hard work was not worth the effort since they were

likely to receive a 3 no matter what. According to one teacher interviewed for this report, lower-performing students also found the 1 to 4 grading to be demoralizing, because they mostly received 1s:

Kids who struggled or were in special ed were miserable, discouraged, and ready to give up because no matter what they did, they earned only

1s. Parents with high-achieving students lamented that their kids had lost their motivation to excel. It was parents of the kids in the middle of the pack, whose 2s and 3s were now the same as the high achievers' grades, that were happiest with it. It had and continues to have, as it is still being implemented in many places, a terrible impact on student motivation.

While there is no official count of how many Maine schools adopted standards-based grading, a 2019 survey of 82 Maine superintendents found that 79 percent said their districts used a 1 to 4 report card for at least one grade. More specifically, 77 percent of grades PreK-2, 75 percent of grades 3-5, 66 percent of grades 6-8, and 53 percent of grades 9-12 used a 1 to 4 report card. This suggests that standards-based grading was widely implemented, particularly for younger grades.¹²²

Habits of Work

Alongside standards-based grading came a new method of evaluating student behavior called Habits of Work. Under a traditional A-F grading system, behaviors like class attendance and participation, tardiness, and adherence to deadlines were often factored into students' grades. For instance, a student who produced an outstanding essay but handed it in 3 days too late might receive a B- instead of an A+.

Since proficiency-based education in principle judged students only on their mastery of state standards, a parallel system of behavioral evaluation called Habits of Work was created to measure non-academic student behaviors. Schools would develop their own "Habits of Work Standards" and students would be evaluated by themselves and their teachers using the 1 to 4 standards-based grading system. These grades would appear on progress reports and report cards, letting parents know how their children were behaving.¹²³ Casco Bay High School in Portland, for instance, graded students on their ability to "work ethically, "work collaboratively," "be

accountable," "persevere," "be community," and "pursue personal best."¹²⁴

While intended to separate behavioral evaluation from academic evaluation, Habits of Work in practice made teachers more responsible for controlling and documenting student behavior. Students with extra energy or who were easily distracted were demotivated by the low marks they saw on their report cards, while some schools went so far as to make student participation in school sports conditional on them mastering Habits of Work standards.

Curriculum Coordinators

Proficiency-based education gave new power to curriculum coordinators, whose job was to ensure curriculum aligned with state standards. Students now had to demonstrate proficiency in specific skills across a variety of classes to graduate, and curriculum coordinators were charged with ensuring they were taught those exact skills. For instance, if students were required to learn 100 English skills to graduate grade 12, such as persuasive writing or interpreting poetry, the curriculum coordinator would have to arrange how, from kindergarten to grade 12, the child would be taught and assessed on them.

With the data they were collecting, it became possible for curriculum coordinators to see whether the introduction of new curriculum or teaching methods had affected students' mastery of state standards. However, to perform these kinds of comparisons, it was necessary to have teachers teaching the same subject teach and assess their students the same way. This led to a push by curriculum coordinators to standardize teaching and assessment within schools, further reducing the freedom of teachers to control their classrooms. Some also requested teachers modify their assessments to input easily into standards-based grading software such as JumpRope, the vendors of

which courted curriculum coordinators through invitations to corporate retreats and conferences.

Backlash to Proficiency-Based Education

After starting to roll out proficiency-based education in 2012, Maine was hit with a backlash from parents, teachers, and lawmakers unhappy with the changes. Here are some of their words, expressing their frustrations:

- “No other state has embraced this model for all their school systems. We’re not ready for this.” – Sen. Earle McCormick, former teacher at RSU 2¹²⁵
- “We are guinea pigs for a new, experimental method of teaching and learning that has been designed to benefit content providers rather than students.” – Emily Tamalge, teacher in Lewiston¹²⁶
- “We’re only till the end of quarter one, and they’re already not able to meet the standards from quarter one of that class, so it’s very concerning... How is this going to work? And to be honest, nobody really ... has a good answer for us.” – Special education teacher¹²⁷

Critics pointing out the negative impacts of proficiency-based education also began to research who was benefiting from its adoption. Great Schools Partnership, an education consulting firm founded by former Commissioner of Education Duke Albanese, saw a 39 percent uptick in contracts after proficiency-based education was mandated, and was rewarded a \$200,000 contract by the state to create standards-based tools.¹²⁸ The Nellie Mae Education Foundation, a Gates-funded organization active in New England, awarded over \$3 million to the Great Schools Partnership, \$200,000 to three Maine school districts, and around a million dollars to Maine education organizations to advance proficiency-based education between 2010 and 2012.¹²⁹

While proficiency-based diplomas were mandated to be adopted state-wide by 2015, lawmakers kept

pushing this date back due to a lack of buy-in from schools and complaints from the public. In 2018, Governor LePage signed “An Act To Repeal Proficiency-Based Diplomas,” which did not actually repeal proficiency-based diplomas but allowed districts to award credit-based diplomas or proficiency-based diplomas. A survey of Maine superintendents at the time found that 25 percent said they would stick with proficiency-based diplomas after they were no longer required, 26 percent would pursue a hybrid model, 38 percent would return to traditional diplomas, and 11 percent were unsure.¹³⁰ In 2019, Governor Janet Mills signed a bill put forward by State Rep. Justin Fecteau (R) that collapsed the two diplomas into a traditional diploma with standards achievement as an option. This was intended to minimize the number of schools that would use or adopt a proficiency-based diploma, as such a thing no longer technically existed under Maine law.¹³¹

Charter Schools

Efforts to legalize charter schools in Maine had been underway since the 1990s but were often met with opposition from organizations like the Maine Education Association and the Maine School Management Association. In 2011, Sen. Garrett Mason (R) sponsored a charter school bill that passed, making Maine the 41st state to implement a charter school system. The bill created a Charter School Commission with the power to authorize up to ten charter schools and allowed local school boards and regional collaboratives of school boards to authorize their own charter schools if they wished to.¹³² An initial draft of the bill had given universities and parent groups the ability to authorize charters as well, but they were excluded from the final bill in an effort to garner support.

The process for a new charter school to be approved in Maine is as follows:

1. An authorizer issues and publicizes a request for proposals.
2. An applicant, typically a principal, superintendent, or business leader, submits an application to that authorizer that includes their proposal for a new charter. Applicants may only submit applications to one authorizer at a time.
3. The authorizer reviews the application and approves or denies it within 90 days.¹³³

Maine's Charter School Commission began approving applications soon after its creation. The first school, the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, opened in 2011. By 2015, there were seven charters operating in Maine enrolling an estimated 1500 students, or 0.84 percent of Maine's K-12 students.

¹³⁴ By 2017 there were nine charters, and a tenth was opened in 2020. Though school boards and regional school board collaboratives had the power to authorize new charter schools, none of them ever attempted to start one.

Evaluating Maine Charter Schools

Whether Maine's charters fulfilled their mission of providing superior education to public schools was a

subject of much debate. Republicans defended them on the grounds they provided a wide variety of school experiences. For example, a student who struggled to sit still in class could attend the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, where they would be exposed to hands-on learning such as farming, beekeeping, and vehicle repair.¹³⁵

Democrats pointed out that many of the students attending such charter schools performed poorly in core subjects like reading, writing, and math.¹³⁶ Figure 23 shows that in the 2017-18 school year, only 30 percent of students attending the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences and 21 percent of those attending Acadia Academy could read and write at grade level, while the average Maine public school had a 59 percent proficiency rate. However, in the same year, 80 percent of students at Baxter Academy tested at or above grade level in English, pointing to variation between charter schools likely attributable to the type of students choosing to attend them. Chronic absenteeism was also a major issue for charter schools, ranging from an absentee rate of 4 percent for Baxter Academy to 68 percent for the Maine Arts Academy, while public schools averaged a rate of 20 percent.

Charter School	Location	Year Opened	Percent at Grade Level for English (2017-18)	Chronic Absence Rate (2017-18)
Maine Academy of Natural Sciences	Hinckley	2011	51%	37%
Cornville Regional Charter School	Cornville	2012	30%	45%
Baxter Academy for Technology and Science	Portland	2013	80%	4%
Fiddlehead School of Art and Sciences	Gray	2013	40%	27%
Harpswell Coastal Academy [Closed 2023]	Harpswell	2013	36%	35%
Maine Connections Academy	Virtual	2014	58%	36%
Maine Virtual Academy	Virtual	2015	43%	34%
Acadia Academy	Lewiston	2016	21%	5%
Maine Arts Academy	Augusta	2016	---	68%
Ecology Learning Center	Unity	2020	---	---
Maine Charter School Average	---	---	45%	32%
Maine Public School Average	---	---	59%	20%

Figure 23. Maine Charter School Comparisons. Source: Maine Department of Education.

Extension of Charter School Cap

After the 2018 midterm elections, Maine Democrats moved to limit the growth of charter schools in the state. The original charter school bill stipulated that the Maine Charter School Commission could only authorize ten charters, while school boards and school board collaboratives could authorize however many they wanted. In 2019, Governor Mills signed into law a bill that expanded the cap to cover all authorizers, meaning that no more than 10 charter schools could operate in the state of Maine simultaneously, regardless of the authorizer.¹³⁷

Restorative Practices

According to a resource linked on the Maine Department of Education's website, restorative practices are "processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing."¹³⁸ These include "restorative justice," "peer juries," "circle processes," and "social-emotional learning."¹³⁹ The thread connecting these practices is the idea that emotional education, dialogue, and forgiveness, will lead fewer students to act out at school or escalate minor conflicts into major ones.

Fundamental to restorative practices is the idea of the “school-to-prison pipeline” illustrated in Figure 24. Students who are disciplined in school more often are more likely to be incarcerated later in life, and proponents believe that by addressing the root causes of school misbehavior, students will be less

likely to end up arrested or imprisoned. Many further argue that traditional school discipline policies are “nourished by implicit biases and institutionalized racism, and aimed unevenly at black, Latino male, and American Indian students, as well as students with disabilities.”¹⁴⁰

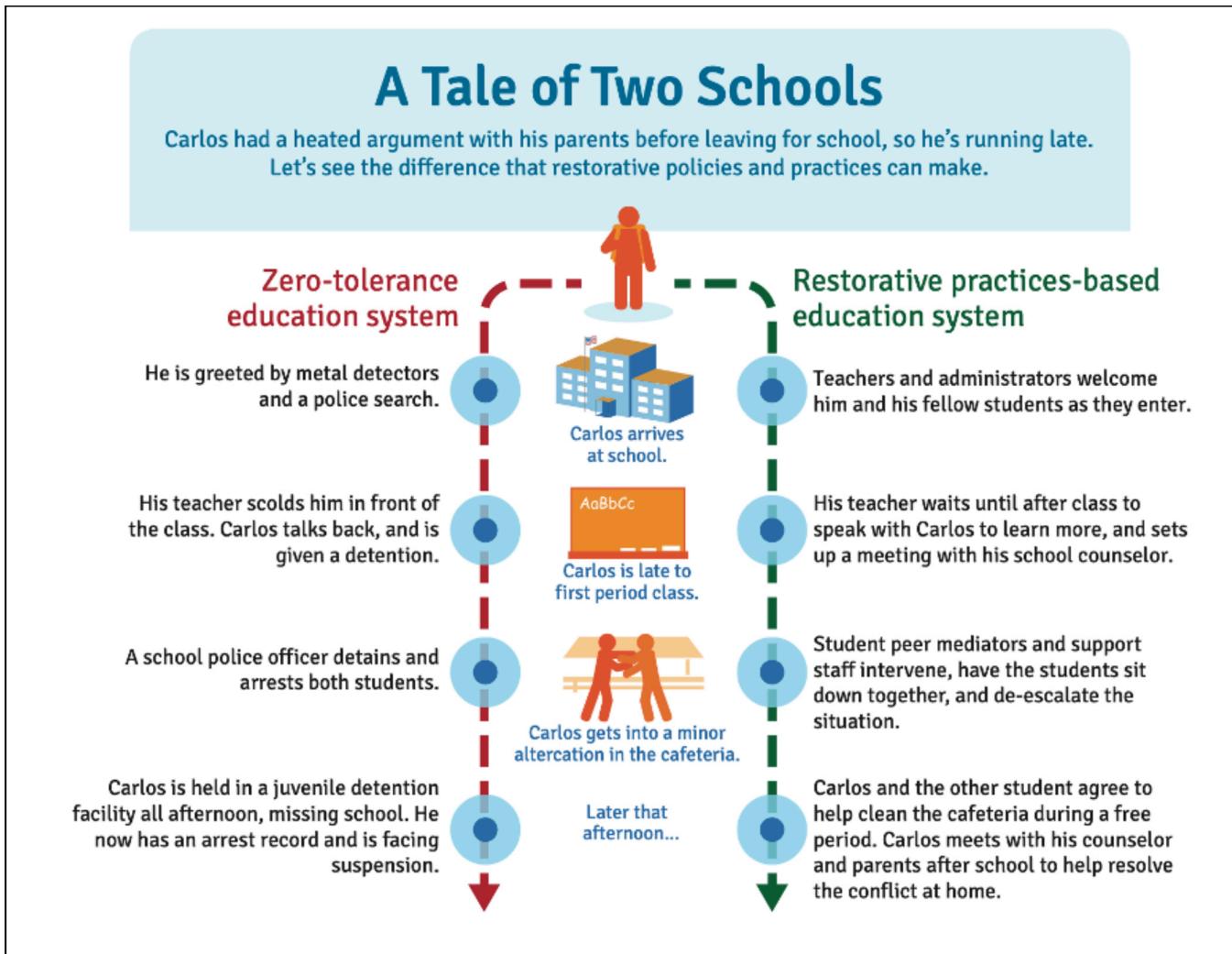


Figure 24. Source: “Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships and Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools.” 2014. Schott Foundation.

Restorative Practices in Maine

In 2012, “An Act to Promote School Attendance and Increase School Achievement” was signed into law. In addition to mandating a variety of measures to reduce truancy and increase graduation rates, the act required school boards to adopt school disciplinary policies which “focus on evidence-based, positive and restorative interventions rather

than set punishments for specific behavior and avoid zero-tolerance practices unless specifically required by federal or state laws, rules or regulations.”¹⁴¹ As a result, districts were required to adopt restorative practices and eschew strict or traditional forms of discipline.

Several nonprofits and consultants popped up to meet demand for restorative practices programs and

trainings in Maine schools. The Restorative Justice Institute of Maine provides school consulting and coaching with a “restorative, trauma-informed and equitable approach.”¹⁴² Restorative School Culture LLC brings restorative practices into schools, trains educators in the method, and hosts a summer institute on restorative practices, positive behavior intervention strategies, social-emotional learning, trauma-informed education, and growth mindset.¹⁴³ The Hutchinson Center at the University of Maine offers an online course in restorative practices marketed towards educators and other professionals.¹⁴⁴ Many more restorative practices organizations are financially supported by the Maine Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, a state advisory group established by the 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act.¹⁴⁵

The restorative practices teachers are trained in are premised on the belief that students will be better behaved if they express themselves emotionally, and that disciplining students in a traditional manner is unjust and inequitable. One teacher interviewed for this report described the philosophy of discipline imparted during one such training:

The whole idea was that we need to reduce suspensions and disciplinary action. Kids shouldn't be being disciplined... We can't suspend kids. We can't give them detention. We can't even call home. What you want to do is you want to talk. You want to get to the root of the problem. You want to have them share their feelings, find out what's really troubling them, and then somehow magically fix it. I don't know how we actually were meant to fix it because we're teachers, we're not trained as psychologists or counselors.

A restorative practice that has been introduced to classrooms in Maine is the magic circle. To start or end the day, students would sit in a circle, and their teacher would pose a probing question, like “what’s something that really bothers you?” or “how does it make you feel when...” The teacher would then

throw out a ball, and the student who caught it would answer the question before tossing it to the next student. This has in effect turned classrooms into group therapy sessions with the teacher as facilitator. Another teacher interviewed for this report described what these magic circles looked like in her classroom:

The classroom becomes almost like this group counseling session, but this really amateur one where it's just me, a public school teacher who has no training on how to do it. And kids are there talking about their abusive stepdad who drinks too much, and then other guys try to one up them with their story about this or that... That was what we were encouraged to do. That was something that we were really being told that's what we should do... The idea was just if they had a chance to express themselves, that then they would behave better. I don't know. I didn't see it working very much... I wanted to get to know them. I wanted to support them and help them. But this was taking that instinct a lot of teachers have and channeling it into this creepy program. I actually think sometimes they did more harm than good for the kids themselves.

The adoption of restorative practices has not led to declining behavioral incidents in Maine schools. Instead, since 2014, the number of violence-, drug-, and weapon-related behavioral incidents reported by Maine schools has nearly tripled from 4,989 to 13,793, while seclusions have doubled from 2,394 to 4,539 and restraints have doubled from 6,930 to 13,074 (see Figure 8).

Maine teachers now restrain and seclude students at the highest rate of any state.¹⁴⁶ Empirical research conducted in Maine backs up the ineffectiveness of restorative practices: a 2019 study of 14 Maine middle schools found no difference in outcomes between schools that adopted restorative practices and those that did not.¹⁴⁷

Dear Colleague Letters on School Discipline

During President Obama's administration, the Office of Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education initiated a series of policy communications known as "Dear Colleague" letters. These letters served to clarify the Department's stance on civil rights issues and provided schools and universities with guidance on how to meet their legal obligations under federal law. The letters were controversial, as they allowed the Department to dictate education policy for schools across the country by reinterpreting existing statutes.

In 2014, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and the Department of Justice jointly issued a "Dear Colleague" letter on the non-discriminatory use of school discipline. The letter informed educators that non-disabled black students were three times as likely as non-disabled white students to be expelled or suspended, and that black and Hispanic students comprised 50 percent of school-related arrests or referrals to law enforcement. It told schools that they were now liable for discriminatory behavior staff members engaged in, and any disparate impact a school policy had on a racial group.¹⁴⁸

Two years later, another "Dear Colleague" letter was issued telling schools that disabled students were being secluded and restrained at a far greater rate than non-disabled students and that this constituted discrimination as well.¹⁴⁹

These letters made disciplining students more legally precarious. As a result, many schools began looking for alternative means of managing their students' behavior with the hopes that disciplinary measures could be reduced or avoided, leading many schools to adopt restorative practices and other alternatives methods of school discipline.¹⁵⁰

Transgender Students

Doe v. Clenchy

In 2009, a transgender student named Nicole Maines was bullied by a classmate while attending Asa Adams Elementary School in Orono, Maine. After hearing from the bully that Nicole was using the girls' bathroom, the bully's grandfather called the school and complained to administrators. Nicole had been granted permission by the school to use the girls' bathroom, but following the complaint, the school instructed that the gender-neutral restroom should be used instead. Nicole's family believed this to be a violation of the 2005 Maine Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on gender identity.¹⁵¹

In 2011, GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Defenders) filed a suit in Penobscot Superior Court on behalf of the Maines family, but a year later it was decided that denying a biological male who identified as a girl access to a girl's restroom was not a violation of the Maine Human Rights Act. GLAD appealed the decision and filed an appeal brief in the Maine Supreme Court, and in 2014, Maine's highest court ruled that Nicole's rights had been violated under the Maine Human Rights Act.¹⁵²

The district was required to allow Nicole to use the girls' bathroom and pay GLAD \$75,000 to cover the Maines' legal fees. This was the first time in the country a student had won the right to use the bathroom matching their gender identity.¹⁵³ Maine schools took notice of the fact that if they denied transgender students the right to use school facilities that accorded with their gender identity, they would be in violation of the law. However, the Maine Supreme Court's decision did specify that transgender students must prove a doctor had diagnosed them with gender dysphoria to be entitled to gender-affirming accommodations.¹⁵⁴

Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students

In 2016, the Office of Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education published another “Dear Colleague” letter, this time on transgender students. The informed schools that they would violate Title IX and be guilty of sex discrimination if a transgender student were treated differently than another student of the same gender identity. Moreover, it specified that schools were now obligated to create a safe and non-discriminatory environment for transgender students, use their preferred names and pronouns, allow them to use the restrooms and locker rooms of the gender they identified as, and let them participate in sex-segregated athletics as their chosen gender.¹⁵⁵ A year later under President Trump, the letter was rescinded, but many schools continued to enforce gender-affirming policies.¹⁵⁶

Every Student Succeeds Act

In December 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act into law, which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. Every Student Succeeds was designed to maintain the systems of accountability established by No Child Left Behind while allowing schools a greater degree of flexibility in terms of how they helped their students succeed. States were allowed to develop their own standards to measure school and student performance, and schools performing poorly received more funding instead of less. The act also increased the amount of data that schools, districts, and states were required to collect and make public, with the expressed intent

of helping parents make better choices about where to send their children and giving policymakers more information about which schools needed interventions for which metrics. Each state was required to release a yearly report card providing data on test performance, graduation rates, suspensions, expulsions, absenteeism, school violence, teacher qualification, and many other areas.¹⁵⁷

Maine’s Evolving Education Plan

To comply with the Every Students Succeed Act, Maine developed a strategic plan called Evolving Education, which the Maine Department of Education argued was not a deviation from its prior course of action, but rather an embrace of the flexibilities offered under the new act. The state established a multi-tier system of support for schools in the state depending upon their performance, such that the lowest performing schools would obtain the highest degree of state support and resources. Maine also committed to providing equitable access to high-quality educators across the state, improving anti-bullying efforts, increasing student access to technological equipment, revamping transition services for delinquent or at-risk youth, improving language instruction for English language learners, and providing more support for Maine’s rural schools.¹⁵⁸

PART IV: IDEOLOGICAL EDUCATION (2017-2022)

Political Bias

Politically motivated discrimination against students

In January of 2017, Donald Trump was sworn in as President. President Trump was a polarizing figure whose unexpected election led many to ask whether America was more racist, sexist, and xenophobic than they had previously believed. While presidents are generally treated with respect regardless of their political party, President Trump was treated with considerable disdain by those who did not support him.

There were several incidents in Maine schools in which teachers or administrators treated students who favored President Trump in a politically discriminatory way. In October 2020, a Massabesic High School student was removed from her Zoom math class because she displayed a flag supporting President Trump in her background. The school district, RSU 57, later commented to the media that it “supports the rights of both students and staff to express their views on matters of public concern,” but that there are “times when the District must make content neutral time, place and manner restrictions on speech to ensure the orderly operation of its schools and the educational process.”¹⁵⁹ It seems unlikely that a student who had displayed a President Obama background would have been treated in the same way.

In another incident, Ann Cook, a teacher at Gray-New Gloucester Middle School was caught attacking the political beliefs of a student’s parents. “Your father and stepfather are just caught up in the propaganda,” said Cook. “They believe the lies.

And that’s the whole point of lying is that people believe it just ‘cause you say it.” She also said that when she sees someone wearing a “MAGA” hat, she thinks to herself “that’s somebody who needs to be educated.” Cook made comments about President Trump, saying that he “doesn’t pay taxes,” “cheats the system,” is “a liar and a cheater,” and is “not that smart.” She further claimed that President Trump “has a degree from a college, a very very low level college, and he was a very poor student,” while President Biden is “very well educated.”¹⁶⁰ (Trump attended the University of Pennsylvania, while Biden attended the University of Delaware and Syracuse University).

One teacher interviewed for this report said that the day after President Trump won the election, his school principal got on the intercom and consoled the students, saying to them that “this is a very challenging and scary time for a lot of people.” Had Hillary Clinton won the 2016 election, it is unlikely that the principal would have made similar remarks. Several teachers interviewed said that in the staff room, their colleagues would routinely disparage Republican politicians like Donald Trump and Mike Pence, frequently saying “Fuck Trump” throughout his presidency. Again, had Hillary Clinton won in 2016, it is unlikely schools would have tolerated their staff saying “Fuck Hillary” in the staff room.

Pushback on Political Neutrality

Schools that tried to be politically unbiased often faced pushback from students and teachers. For instance, in October of 2020, Scarborough High School students protested a letter that had been sent to school staff instructing them not to wear or display controversial slogans while on school property (see Figure 25). Among the prohibited phrases were “Black

Lives Matter," "White Lives Matter," and "Make America Great Again."¹⁶¹ The students objected to "Black Lives Matter" being included in the list, claiming the slogan and movement were not political. Rather than stand by their original

decision to prohibit such slogans on school grounds, the district recanted, saying they were wrong for having included the phrase "Black Lives Matter" on the list.¹⁶²



Figure 25. Source: Stackhouse, Sean. 2020. "Scarborough High School Students Protest Staff Being Told Not to Wear or Display Controversial Slogans." News Center Maine.

While some view Black Lives Matter as apolitical, the organization has been openly political since its inception.¹⁶³ At the time of writing, Black Lives Matter has seven political demands listed on their website, including "convict and ban Trump from future political office" and "expel Republican members of congress who attempted to overturn the election and incited a white supremacist attack."¹⁶⁴ In addition, the phrase "Black Lives Matter" expresses the view that America is a white supremacist country with racist institutions that oppress and subjugate black people

according to Alicia Garza, one of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter movement:

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgment that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgment that Black

women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence. Black queer and trans folks bearing a unique burden in a hetero-patriarchal society when they want to buy a cheap generic Viagra that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us is state violence; the fact that 500,000 Black people in the US are undocumented immigrants and relegated to the shadows is state violence; the fact that Black girls are used as negotiating chips during times of conflict and war is state violence; Black folks living with disabilities and different abilities bear the burden of state-sponsored Darwinian experiments that attempt to squeeze us into boxes of normality defined by White supremacy is state violence. And the fact is that the lives of Black people—not ALL people—exist within these conditions is consequence of state violence.¹⁶⁵

Student Walkouts in Maine

As it became more acceptable to express social and political positions at school, students began organizing and participating in walkouts, in which they would leave class to protest an issue or raise awareness of a cause.

Following the 2018 Parkland shooting in Florida, students across the country participated in mass walkouts. At South Portland High School, more than half the student body staged a walkout. Approximately 200 Cape Elizabeth High School students walked out and gathered in the parking lot where there were musical performances, speeches, and a reading of the names of the victims. Dozens of students also walked out at Biddeford High School, and demonstrations occurred in Portland, Freeport, York, and Yarmouth.¹⁶⁶

Beginning in 2021, several high schools across the state saw students organizing walkouts to protest how their schools were handling sexual assault. In

October of 2021, Camden Hills Regional High School students staged a walkout “to protest against the school’s handlings of sexual assault cases.”¹⁶⁷ In February of 2022, Medomak Valley students walked out two days in a row to “shine a light on sexual violence and to challenge school administrators to more effectively address student concerns.”¹⁶⁸ In May of 2022, Brunswick High School students organized a walkout “amid allegations of sexual assaults that occurred at the school, and what they said was an inadequate response by the administration.” According to contemporaneous reporting, “faculty watched and listened at the school entrance” as students shared their personal stories and experiences during the walkout.¹⁶⁹

On March 3, 2023, Presumpscot Elementary School canceled its math and literacy classes so that students could participate in a “Black Lives Matter” march organized by the fifth-grade Civil Rights Team. As seen in Figure 26, young students paraded through the school, chanting “Black Lives Matter” and holding up Black Lives Matter posters. The march prompted teachers to discuss the Black Lives Matter movement with students as young as kindergarten.¹⁷⁰

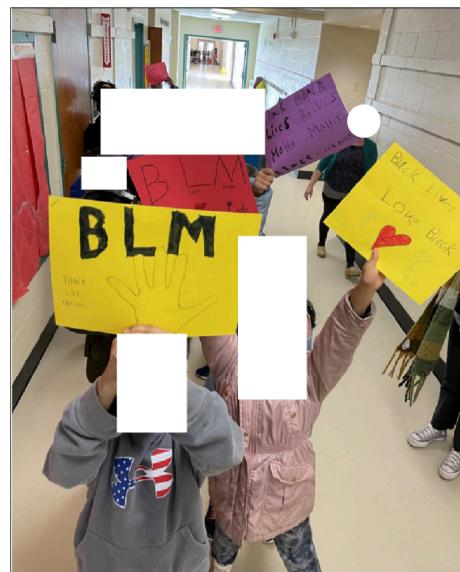


Figure 26. Source: Tomic, Edward. 2023. “Maine Public School Led Elementary School Kids on ‘Black Lives Matter’ March Instead of Math, Literacy Classes.” The Maine Wire.

Carson v. Makin

Under Maine's Town Tuitioning program, students who reside in a district that does not operate its own public school are allowed to attend any public or private school of their family's choosing using government funds. However, students who wished to use these funds to attend a religious school were prohibited from doing so, because of a "non-sectarian" requirement.

In 2018, the Institute for Justice represented two Maine families and sued Commissioner of Education Pender Makin for religious discrimination on the grounds that Maine's "nonsectarian" requirement for schools receiving Town Tuitioning funds was unconstitutional. It eventually made its way to the Supreme Court, and in 2021 the court struck down the Maine law prohibiting religious schools from receiving the funds.¹⁷¹

As a result of the ruling, private religious schools should have become eligible to receive these grants, thereby allowing Maine students living in districts without a public school to take full advantage of this benefit in the same manner as their nonreligious counterparts.

Following the Court's ruling, Maine Attorney General Aaron Frey released a statement declaring that he would work with Governor Mills and the state legislature to find a way to work around the decision and prevent public funds from going to schools that were deemed to be discriminatory and immoral on account of their religious practices and faith-based objections to homosexuality and transgenderism.¹⁷²

Since then, St. Dominic's Academy in Auburn has sued the State of Maine for violating their First and Fourteenth Amendment rights by altering the Maine Human Rights Act in such a way that has continued to bar religious schools from receiving Town Tuitioning funds despite the court's ruling.¹⁷³

COVID-19

On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. This declaration caused immediate and widespread closures, including of schools, and initiated a months-long nationwide quarantine effort. Soon disagreements over business closures, masking requirements, and vaccine mandates heightened social and political tensions among the American people. The pandemic also resulted in a massive amount of funds being distributed to the states to spend on education through legislation such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and the American Rescue Plan Act.

COVID-19 Closures in Maine Schools

Schools in Maine moved their classrooms online in March of 2020. An estimated 20 percent of students lacked access to functional internet at home, leading the Maine Department of Education to distribute laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots to families in need.¹⁷⁴ By April, Governor Mills recommended that schools remain closed for the remainder of the school year. Between 2020 and 2021 the number of students being homeschooled doubled.¹⁷⁵

For the 2020-21 school year, most districts returned to in-person education, but all students over the age of five were required to wear face coverings while at school. This requirement was lifted at the end of the 2020-21 school year, meaning that students largely returned to normal education for the 2021-22 school year, although districts could decide whether they wanted to continue masking.¹⁷⁶

Students across the country saw declining test scores as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools had faced closures, staff shortages, high rates of absenteeism and quarantining, and difficulties getting students to pay attention over

Zoom.¹⁷⁷ As measured by NAEP scores, Maine students were amongst the most negatively affected by COVID-19 closures and policies.¹⁷⁸

Figure 27 shows that between 2019 and 2022, they experienced a 10 percent decline in math proficiency and a 6 percent decline in reading proficiency.

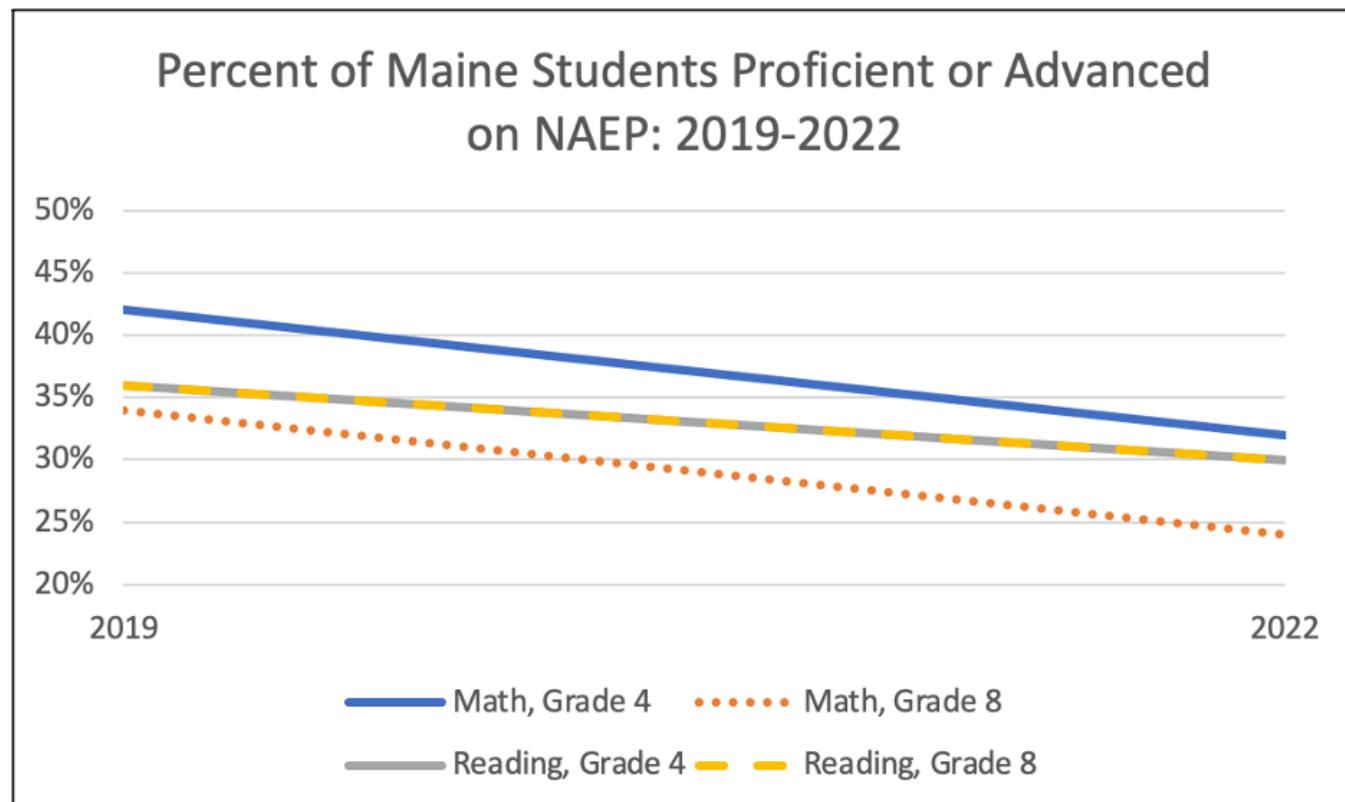


Figure 27. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

Critical Race Theory

Death of George Floyd

On May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, a 46-year-old black man named George Floyd purchased cigarettes from a convenience store with a counterfeit bill. When police arrived and began arresting Floyd, he said he did not want to go in the police car because of his claustrophobia. Derek Chauvin, one of the officers, leaned on his neck to restrain him instead. After repeatedly saying he could not breathe, Floyd struggled for a time before falling unconscious and was pronounced dead later that day.¹⁷⁹

Floyd's death instigated a series of Black Lives Matter protests across the county that continued for several weeks.¹⁸⁰ While public health experts had strongly encouraged Americans to stay at home, many supported the public protesting of Floyd's death,

arguing that the threat to Americans from systemic racism outweighed the threat to public health from the coronavirus.¹⁸¹ Individuals and organizations across America responded by decrying racism, which they saw as the cause of Floyd's death. Discussions and trainings around anti-racism and equity became commonplace at schools, corporations, and other workplaces.

Soon the push for action on racial issues made its way to the K-12 education system. Teachers began to ask for books and materials about minorities, with the intention of using them to initiate class discussions of race and social justice.¹⁸² Students demanded curriculum and instruction that addressed race and racism, as well as more diverse hiring practices and implicit bias training for school staff.¹⁸³ The National Education Association, America's largest teacher's union representing

over three million educators, called for an examination of “how white supremacy culture impacts our biases, our practices and the policies in our own schools and communities.”¹⁸⁴

Many schools began to embrace critical race theory, an academic framework that argues racism is endemic to U.S. institutions, in their teaching, training, and hiring policies. Figure 28 depicts the results of a national survey of 1,505 recent high

school graduates conducted in 2022 on the prevalence of critical race theory in k-12 classrooms. The authors found that 36 percent of students had been taught that America is a systemically racist country, 41 percent had been taught that white people have white privilege, 35 percent had been taught that white people have unconscious bias that negatively affects non-white people, and 45 percent had been taught that America is built in stolen land.¹⁸⁵

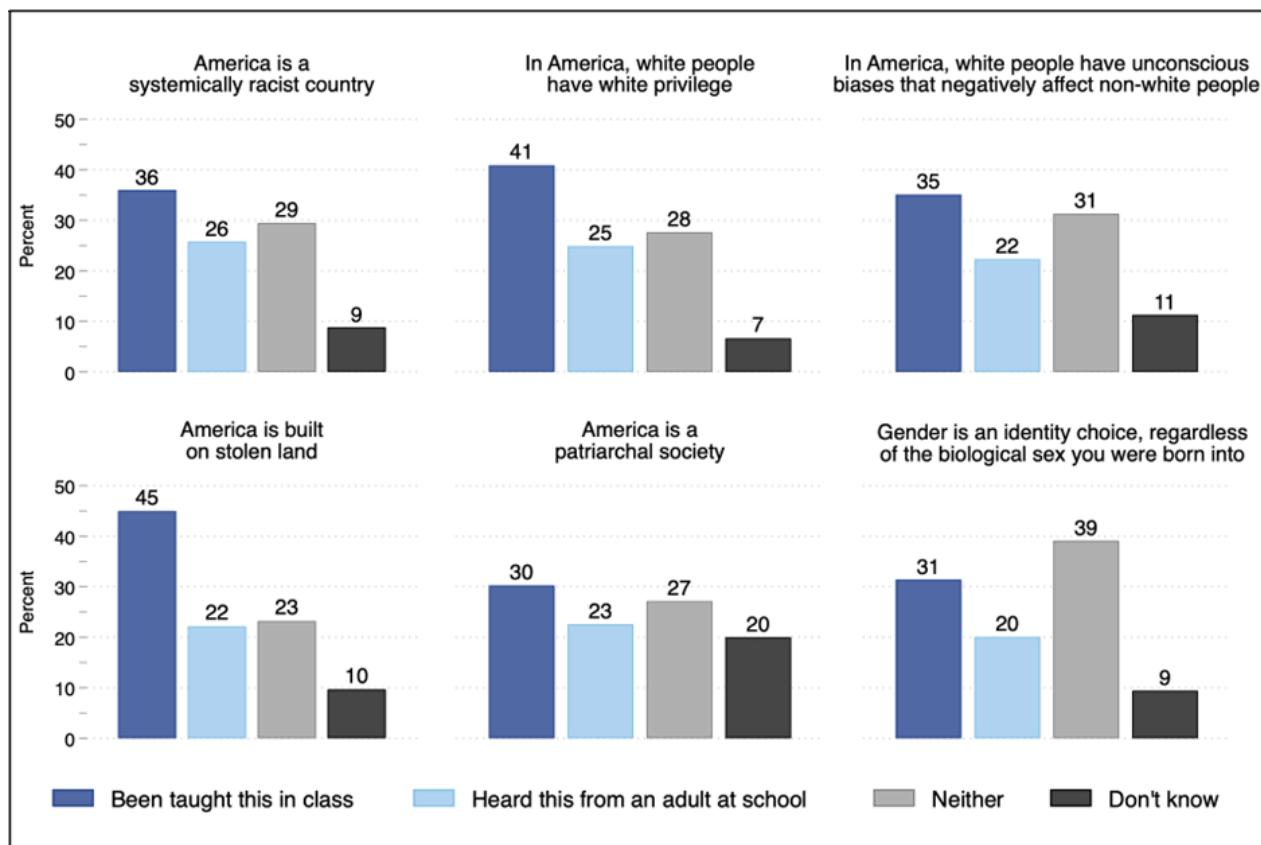


Figure 28. Responses to the question, “Thinking about the school you attended, were you ever taught any of the following concepts in class or did you hear them from adults in the school you attended?” Source: Goldberg and Kaufmann. 2022. “Yes, Critical Race Theory is Being Taught in Schools.” City Journal.

Defining Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory books and curricula emphasize the past and present oppression of racial minorities and argue that modern institutions are systemically racist. A popular example is the 1619 Project, a series of essays published by *The New York Times* that asks readers to reimagine American history as if 1619, the year African slaves arrived in Virginia, was the nation’s birth year, and as if black rather than white

Americans were the central figures in America’s story.¹⁸⁶

The 1619 Project was criticized for its factual inaccuracies, such as its claims that the American Revolution was fought to preserve slavery and that slave labor powered the U.S. economy, and for turning the study of history into a “moral crusade.”¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, educators across

America began adding the 1619 project to their reading lists and teaching it in their classrooms. Soon after, the Pulitzer Center released lesson plans and reading guides based on the 1619 project, which have since been used in over 4,500 classrooms across all fifty states, including school-wide adoptions in Buffalo, Chicago, Washington, Wilmington, and Winston-Salem.¹⁸⁸

Backlash to Critical Race Theory in Schools

The increase in critical race theory in schools did not go unnoticed by parents, who were fully aware of what their children were learning thanks to classes being online in the first year of the pandemic. Many took to school board meetings to protest the teaching of these ideas in their schools as well as to speak on issues such as COVID-19 restrictions and LGBTQ+ policies. The disruptive nature of these meetings, the controversial topics, and the greater involvement of parents, many of whom were angry at district staff, prompted the Department of Justice to investigate threats that had allegedly been made against school board members.¹⁸⁹ Nevertheless, by the end of 2022, twenty-eight states had approved policies or released statements banning the teaching of critical race theory in classrooms.¹⁹⁰

In Maine, parents and community members accused Gardiner Area High School of promoting critical race theory texts on their summer AP English reading list, which contained 33 books on race including "How To Be an Anti-Racist," "White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism," and "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness."¹⁹¹ A father named Shawn McBrairy accused Maine School Administrative District (MSAD) #51 of pushing critical race theory after their superintendent sent a message denouncing white supremacy in the wake of George Floyd's death. The Maine Republican Party included a restriction on critical race theory in schools in its 2022 platform.¹⁹²

Despite these examples, few instances of teachers using mainstream critical race theory texts in the classroom have been reported in Maine. However, ideas from critical race theory, such as that the U.S. education system is systemically racist, or that explicit and implicit racial biases explain contemporary racial disparities, have been adopted by Maine's education leaders under the banner of diversity, equity, and inclusion and social-emotional learning.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Maine

Education Institutions Release Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statement

In December 2020, the Maine Department of Education, alongside the Maine School Boards Association, the Maine School Superintendents Association, the Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities, the Maine Education Association, the Maine Principals Association, and the Maine Curriculum Leaders Association, released a joint diversity, equity, and inclusion statement. The statement declared that these organizations "proudly and steadfastly support the educators and districts in Maine who are taking on the work of understanding and dismantling racism and inequity in our schools and communities."¹⁹³

The statement was divisive and ideological. The authors wrote that "equity depends on a deliberate and systematic abolition of the inequities that have been sewn into the fabric of American society." They argued that "these persistent inequities have long disadvantaged students on the basis of race, sex, gender, gender expression, language, physical and intellectual ability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, indigenous origin, religion, and all aspects of human identity that have been subjugated within our society," emphasizing the role played by the education system in "perpetuating racial inequities." "Examining racism and inequity is difficult work," they wrote. "As each student of Maine is a future citizen of

our global society, we believe this is work that needs to be engaged in respectfully and civilly by all the schools and communities in our state. Understanding and addressing racism and inequity will take many different forms, all of which are valid and needed.” They also stated that the duty of “our educational institutions to provide a safe and equitable place in which all students can thrive, and where students are encouraged to examine their world, their beliefs and their role in society through multiple perspectives,” and that “we can and must strive to attain diversity, equity, and inclusion of all voices and experiences.”¹⁹⁴

Diversity Training Signed into Law

Before long, the push for diversity, equity, and inclusion from educators made its way into law. In June of 2021, Governor Mills signed “An Act To Require Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Training or Implicit Bias Training for School Resource Officers.” The bill required school resource officers to complete diversity, equity, and inclusion or implicit bias training at least once during their first year of employment.¹⁹⁵ When the bill was up for consideration in front of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, it was supported by all of the Democratic legislators on the committee, while all Republican legislators, and

the only Independent legislator, opposed it.¹⁹⁶ Representatives of the Maine School Board Association, the Maine Education Association, and the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition testified in support of the bill, while only a private citizen offered testimony in opposition.¹⁹⁷

Soon after Maine’s legislature directed the Maine Department of Education to “review best practices for the training of school staff on issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion” and “identify gaps in training, areas of strength and areas needing improvement and shall identify curricula best suited to the needs of the State, its students and school staff.”¹⁹⁸ In September of 2022, the Department released a report summarizing their research and recommendations.¹⁹⁹ They conducted a survey of 1,748 Maine school staff, the results of which are depicted in Figure 29, finding that 38 percent had participated in a training on race/racism, 32 percent in a training on gender identity/expression, and another 32 percent in a training on LGBTQ+ sexual orientation. Just 22 percent had never attended a diversity training of any kind.

Training	Frequency	Percent
Race/ Racism	668	38.20%
Gender Identity/ Expression	555	31.70%
LGBTQ+ Sexual Orientation	552	31.60%
Physical Disability / Intellectual Disability	500	28.60%
DEI Comprehensive Training	468	26.80%
Socioeconomic Status (SES)/ Poverty	451	25.80%
Indigenous People / Wabanaki Studies	260	14.90%
Language Diversity	183	10.50%
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (Other)	68	3.90%
World Religion	59	3.40%
None	376	21.50%

Figure 29. DEI Professional Learning Topic Areas. Source: “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Training and Professional Development Requirements. Appendix B.” 2022. Maine Legislature.

Over 85 percent of staff who had participated in one or more trainings felt that they had positively impacted their “ability to serve diverse populations,” while 15 percent said they felt less prepared to do so after the training.²⁰⁰

Through focus groups, the Department’s researchers also found that students wanted “more DEI professional learning for teachers and staff,” and were upset that teachers made inaccurate assumptions about their gender identity, sexual orientation, and academic potential based on race. Students also complained that hate speech was not being addressed enough in classrooms, and that more teachers needed to foster “a climate of mutual respect” in their classrooms. Relevant to this, was a discussion of changes to Maine’s educator credentialing requirements, which by 2022 were slated to include a “required diversity-centered course (e.g., culturally responsive teaching, multicultural education, intercultural education, second language acquisition or world language teaching methods).”²⁰¹

The report concluded with the Maine Department of Education issuing three recommendations: Enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion professional learning opportunities across the state, support educational organizations trying to use data to improve their professional learning opportunities, and “increase the capacity of DOE staff in order to provide DEI professional learning across the state.”²⁰²

While diversity trainings for educators are common in Maine and elsewhere, there is little evidence to suggest that they help to reduce prejudice or discrimination. A recent review of 418 experiments testing the impact of anti-prejudice interventions found that the current quality of research was overall poor and “empirically ill-suited to provide actionable, evidence-based recommendations for reducing prejudice.”²⁰³ Examining diversity trainings specifically, they found that when trainings were conducted in real workplaces and when sample sizes were large

enough to produce reliable results, the effects of the trainings were statistically negligible.²⁰⁴

SAT Discontinued

Since 2005, Maine has made every high school junior take the SAT. But in 2021, on the heels of the massive explosion of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and declining test scores from the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Mills signed “An Act To Discontinue the Use of the SAT in Maine Schools” into law.²⁰⁵ The law was passed over concerns that the SAT was not a fair or equitable test, with claims the tests were biased against low-income, English language learner, and minority students. The SAT was replaced with MAP assessments, created by the Northwest Evaluation Association. The SAT remains available for free to Maine students, though many Maine universities have stopped requiring it.²⁰⁶

Equity Consultants

To further demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, several Maine districts have hired equity consultants to provide staff trainings and conduct equity audits examining how school policies and practices affect students and staff belonging to different identity groups, such as race, gender, or sexuality. These services, which cost tens of thousands of dollars, are time-consuming for teachers and administrators, who otherwise would be able to dedicate their full attention to educating students on the basic skills and knowledge many are currently lacking. Some find the trainings humiliating and Orwellian, as common-sense statements like “white supremacy isn’t a problem at our school” or “colorblindness is the best way to combat racism” can lead to mockery and derision from consultants and colleagues.²⁰⁷

In 2019, RSU 21 solicited help from an equity consultant after a black teacher brought complaints of racist incidents experienced at Kennebunk High School to the Maine Human Rights Commission, and ultimately won \$50,000 in a settlement with the district.²⁰⁸ The district hired Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, who implemented a three-year plan that

included “collaboratively develop[ing] a strategic plan for educational equity,” “conduct[ing] a root cause analysis of discipline, school climate, and academic data,” “perform[ing] an equity review of the district’s policies and procedures policies and practices,” and “support[ing] ongoing professional development for staff and administrators.” The firm’s Center for Education Equity led focus groups of students, parents, staff, and community members about equity, with participants in these focus groups expressing concerns about the “pervasiveness of white supremacy,” the relationship between “racial diversity” and “equity,” and how to deal with “LGBTQ, ageism, sexism, homophobia, heterosexuals or classism.” Based on their research in the district, Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium recommended that the district hire an equity officer, create a district-wide equity task force, and develop a district-wide strategic plan for equity and diversity.²⁰⁹

In June of 2020: MSAD #72 hired Maine Intercultural Communications Consultants to support their “goal of being a welcoming place for all.” The firm had administrators take an Intercultural Development Inventory test online which measures one’s ability to “bridge effectively across cultural differences”, then participate in Foundational Intercultural Training followed by group and individual debriefing sessions. The training included group coaching, individual coaching, and continued consulting support. The initial bill for these services came to approximately \$12,000.²¹⁰

In August of 2020, RSU 5 hired Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium to provide the district with “professional development and technical assistance” over the course of 37 days. This included “equity audience and needs assessment,” “focus groups and review of existing data,” “expert consultation, training, and technical assistance in the development and implementation of education practices designed to increase equity and reduce disproportionality in discipline,” and “training participants in using equitable decision-making procedures, and practices.” The contract amounted to \$49,755 in total.²¹¹

In August of 2020, The Maine School Management Association and Maine Superintendents Association partnered with Lawrence Alexander, an equity consultant from Carney Sandoe and Associates Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Practice Group, to present “The Cultural Competence Institute for Maine Educators.” This was a year-long program of professional development sessions covering topics such as “developing a brave space for conversations about race in our schools,” “creating a sustainable practice for diversity, equity, and inclusion in our schools,” and “recruiting, hiring and retaining faculty of color” Individual 90-minute sessions delivered over Zoom were priced at \$125 per person, or \$1500 for a group of five for the entire year.²¹²

RSU 22 hired Abbott & Associates to produce an Equity Audit Report for 2020-2021. They found that knowledge of and commitment to equity were “unevenly distributed across the district,” and that there were “potentially significant levels of discomfort and anxiety about equity work, practice, and changing norms... in the district.” They recommended RSU 22 create opportunities for more equity dialogue among staff, organize professional development around equity frameworks, establish curriculum guidelines for racially and culturally diverse content, and “develop a diversity-hiring strategy and a process for evaluating and considering equity proficiency when making hiring decisions.”²¹³ The report cost the district approximately \$15,000.²¹⁴

Falmouth Public Schools hired Curriculum Management Solutions, Inc. for the purpose of conducting an equity audit. Although documentation is not available as to when the district first established a relationship with the firm, Curriculum Management Solutions, Inc. published its final report on the district’s equity audit on February 22, 2022.²¹⁵ Among other things, they recommended that Falmouth schools “adopt a clear vision and specific expectations for equity and inclusion” and “design, develop, deliver, and monitor a high quality curriculum that supports

equity, diversity, and inclusion; culturally relevant instruction; and differentiation and scaffolding for diverse learners.” The equity audit cost the district no money, as it was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.²¹⁶

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching is a pedagogical method which emphasizes the importance of considering students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences in learning. In practice, this involves students discussing their personal experiences and identities in class, tying lessons to students’ cultures and communities, encouraging students to discuss class content from the perspective of their culture, and ensuring classroom materials feature authors of different races, religions, classes, genders, and sexualities. “Psychological safety,” that is, the importance of the classroom being an emotionally safe and non-judgemental space in which students’ cultural identities and experiences are not challenged, is prioritized. Elements of anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and social-emotional learning are incorporated into lessons and activities.²¹⁷ Teachers are taught that the implicit biases of educators are one of the reasons why students from marginalized backgrounds have failed to excel academically.²¹⁸ The approach is, in essence, an applied version of critical race theory that roots its legitimacy in students’ cultural identities and experiences rather than in appeals to history or sociology.

In Maine, the Department of Education plays a significant role in promoting culturally responsive teaching. They encourage districts and educators to use culturally responsive resources in the classroom and promote culturally responsive pedagogy trainings which include material on implicit bias and access to culturally responsive classroom tools. Moreover, the Maine Education Association conducts annual training for thousands of educators on topics like “Race, Equity and Social Justice,” and “Creating Equitable Systems for All Students” which emphasize the

integration of culturally responsive practices in all academic and non-academic programming.²¹⁹

Social Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning, often abbreviated to SEL, is an education method intended to make children more aware of their emotions. While in theory social-emotional learning exists to help students thrive academically and in their personal lives, in practice it places the school between the parent and child, turning teachers into faux-therapists who inculcate students into a set of values rooted in far-left ideology.

The term social-emotional learning was popularized by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), an organization founded by psychologist Daniel Goleman and philanthropist Eileen Rockefeller in 1994.²²⁰ A year later, Goleman introduced social-emotional learning to a wider audience with his bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, in which he argued that emotional intelligence was a better predictor of life success than general intelligence and that it could be learned.²²¹ Two years later, CASEL published *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*. In the years since, CASEL has worked “to advance SEL in schools nationally and worldwide.”²²² Since 2016, they claim to have “scaled state-level SEL work from 8 states to over 40 states and one U.S. territory, representing more than 90 percent of districts, schools, teachers, and students in the US.”²²³ Today, 76 percent of principals nationally say their schools use social-emotional learning programming or curriculum.²²⁴

CASEL describes social-emotional learning as the “process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”²²⁵ They argue that students thrive emotionally and academically when social-emotional

learning is implemented in schools, with improvements in social skills, mental health, school safety, and lifetime outcomes observable from hundreds of studies.²²⁶

According to CASEL, social-emotional learning in the classroom is made up of three components. The first is “a supportive classroom climate,” in which students feel emotionally safe and a sense of belonging. The second is the “integration of SEL into academic instruction,” which involves incorporating skills like perspective-taking and developing a growth mindset into traditional classroom activities. The third component is “explicit SEL instruction,” in which students are made to “cultivate, practice, and reflect on social and emotional competencies in ways that are developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive.”²²⁷

Within the classroom, social-emotional learning typically takes the form of activities in which students’

social and emotional issues are discussed as a group or individually reflected upon. These include various kinds of check ins, in which teachers probe students on their emotions; social scenario activities in which teachers ask students how they would respond in a given social situation, a variety of wellness activities to promote mindfulness, gratitude, and reflectiveness, and roleplay activities in which students act out challenging social or emotional situations (see Figure 30). Outside the classroom, social-emotional learning involves schools priming students to think more reflectively about their emotions and behaviors. This might take the form of posters in school hallways with messages like “I say what I am feeling, and listen empathetically to what the other person is saying,” or students playing sports being asked to discuss what went right and wrong in the last match before a new one begins.²²⁸

Social-Emotional Activities For Every Classroom

Images from Kate Hadfield, Sarah Pecorino, DigiKia, Amiee Pepin, Kaitlyn Albani, Marchelle's KG Zone, Educlips

Pathway
2 SUCCESS

Daily Greetings 	Emotions Check-In 	Journal Writing 	Class Circle Time 	Morning Meeting 
Brain Breaks 	Gratitude List 	Mindful Morning Check-In 	Read Alouds 	Practice Coping Strategies 
SEL Chats 	End-of-the-Day Reflection 	Positive Affirmations 	SEL Art Activities 	Hold Class Meetings 
Weekly Goal Reflection 	SEL Skill of the Day or Week 	Show-and-Tell 	Shout Out Board 	SEL Quote of the Day 
SEL Crafts 	Practice Mindfulness 	Social Scenarios 	Play Games and Sports 	Daily Check-In Journal 
Daily Jobs 	AM / PM Check-In 	SEL Question of the Day 	Catch-Up and Organizing Time 	Group Challenges 

Figure 30. Social-emotional learning classroom activities. Source: "30 Social-Emotional Learning Activities for Every Classroom." 2022. Pathway to Success.

Although some see social-emotional learning as beneficial for children, others have raised concerns about the degree to which it emphasizes the role of students' feelings and emotions in the classroom. Social-emotional learning asks teachers to act like therapists or social workers for their students, uncovering and addressing trauma, probing students' psyches, and changing how children think about the relationships they have with their family and friends.²²⁹ This is clearly an overreach on the part of teachers, who are underqualified to act in therapeutic roles, and has the potential to

emotionally harm students. As journalist Robert Pondisco stated in a recent report on therapeutic education, "as damaging to children as it might be for a teacher to perform poorly at teaching reading, math, or history, the effect of being a poor mental health professional could be even more dire."²³⁰

In line with this faux-therapeutic approach, social-emotional learning is often paired with student surveys that ask students questions about their mental health, behavior, and identity. For instance, the Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey asks students

to reveal sensitive information such as their sexual orientation, if they have attempted suicide, brought a weapon to school, had sex or been raped, or used drugs in the past year.²³¹ Another social-emotional learning survey in Maine, the Panorama Student Survey, asks questions about students' relationship with the classroom environment, including whether they felt supported by their teachers and whether class topics related to their personal values.²³² These surveys inevitably identify social, emotional, and behavioral issues students are dealing with, which then justifies more social-emotional learning being used in schools.

While studies touting social, emotional, and academic benefits of social-emotional learning are abundant, claims that social-emotional learning is backed by solid evidence should not be taken at face value. A 2010 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that social-emotional learning did not increase academic achievement or reduce behavioral problems.²³³ A 2017 review of 68 social-emotional learning studies by the RAND Corporation found no highly rigorous studies showing the teaching method improved academic achievement, interpersonal skills, disciplinary outcomes, or other outcomes of interest.²³⁴ In addition, many of the meta-analyses that CASEL cites in support of social-emotional learning include studies that do not resemble contemporary social-emotional learning programs.²³⁵

Most significantly, the theory underlying social-emotional learning, that emotional intelligence is more important for success than intelligence, has not held up to scrutiny. For instance, a 2019 meta-analysis found that differences in emotional intelligence only explained 4 to 15 percent of the variation between students in academic performance, while conscientiousness explained 20 to 21 percent and intelligence explained 58 to 69 percent.²³⁶ Studies of the relationship between emotional intelligence and job performance yield similar results.²³⁷

Transformative SEL

Critics of social-emotional learning had long maintained that it smuggled in radical views and values, and this was confirmed in 2019 when CASEL announced a new form of social-emotional learning implementation called Transformative SEL. According to CASEL, Transformative SEL "focuses on skills for individual success, interpersonal relations, and community-building, as well as skills needed to ensure democratic, fair, and inclusive communities... [It also] facilitates critical examination of individual and contextual factors that contribute to inequities and collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community, and societal well-being."²³⁸

Among the recommendations for implementing Transformative SEL is the introduction of "instruction that honors and makes connections to students' lived experiences and identities and scaffolds learning to build an understanding of others' lived experiences," "culturally responsive education and youth-guided approaches, such as project-based learning and youth participatory action research," and "developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that engage students and adults in examining current and historical events; social norms; prejudices and biases; and how issues of race, class, and culture impact our society." CASEL also advocates for the provision of "opportunities for youth to use their voice and skills to examine inequities and create solutions for social change."²³⁹

The radicalism of Transformative SEL can be seen in how CASEL defines the five social-emotional learning competencies that it seeks to teach students: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. While these competencies sound innocuous, what CASEL and other proponents of social-emotional learning mean by them is not, as can be seen in Figure 31.

Transformative SEL

SEL COMPETENCY EXAMPLES

Self-Awareness	Personal and sociocultural identities, recognition of beliefs, mindsets & biases
Self-Management	Stress management, self-care, perseverance, agency
Social Awareness	Perspective-taking, empathy, belonging
Relationship Skills	Collaborative problem solving, co-construction, effective interpersonal communication
Responsible decision-making	Ethical responsibility, distributive justice, collective well-being



Made possible with support from Allstate Foundation

Figure 31. Slide from a presentation on Transformative SEL. Source: CASEL [@caselorg] 2020. “In today’s webinar: Transformative #SEL means deepening the definition of the 5 SEL competencies to support equity and collective well-being.” Twitter.

CASEL’s definition of self-awareness includes understanding the intersectional identities of oneself and others and cleansing one’s mind of prejudices and implicit bias. Self-management is said to involve developing one’s agency to advocate individually and collectively for social change. Social awareness is defined as being empathetic towards people of varying identity groups, identifying unjust social norms, and understanding how people’s behavior is influenced by systemic factors. Relationship skills is taken to mean that one demonstrates cultural competency and stands up for the rights of others. Perhaps most problematically, responsible decision-making is defined as making decisions which lead to wealth and resources being (re)distributed in a way that benefits the collective. In other words, only decisions which lead to equitable outcomes are deemed “responsible” by CASEL.²⁴⁰

It is not just CASEL who describes Transformative SEL in radical terms. The American Federation of Teachers, the second largest teacher’s union in America, says that Transformative SEL “concentrates

SEL practice on transforming inequitable settings and systems, and promoting justice-oriented civic engagement” and strives to “redistribut[e] power to promote social justice through increased engagement in school and civic life.”²⁴¹ Whereas the original iteration of social-emotional learning sold itself as value-neutral, CASEL now openly advertises that their programming functions to integrate far-left values into every aspect of K-12 education.

Social-Emotional Learning in Maine

At the end of 2018, the Maine Department of Education, in partnership with the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention announced a social-emotional learning pilot program called Second Step, intended to reduce substance use among students. Second Step, a “research-based” curriculum “available for grades Kindergarten through 8th grade,” was said to help “nurture skill building and prevent problematic developmental behaviors that are part of the trajectory toward later substance use,” and was considered to be part of Maine’s State Opioid Response plan.²⁴²

Two years later, in October 2020, the Maine Department of Education launched the SEL4ME Curriculum, developed with federal COVID relief funds.²⁴³ In a press release, they described SEL4ME as “Maine’s first, state owned and free, PreK-12th grade social-emotional learning (SEL) Curriculum,” containing “lessons [that] are aligned with industry established best practices, are leveraged through an equity lens, and include over 450 modules that cover PreK-12 scaffolded by grade.” The press release indicated that “while [SEL4ME] curriculum is not a requirement” it is recommended, as “research shows that the benefits of incorporating social-emotional learning into our schools are significant.” Moreover, Maine’s social-emotional learning Team said they would “be providing free

training and support to educators looking to use the SEL4ME curriculum.”²⁴⁴

The SEL4ME page on the Maine Department of Education’s website has hundreds of lessons that students or teachers can access, as well as trainings just for teachers. While most touch on topics like wellbeing and self-control, some are clearly about diversity, equity, and inclusion.²⁴⁵ For instance, Figure 32 shows teacher trainings such as “understanding diversity in the classroom,” “tales from the trenches: discussing civil disobedience and protest,” “supporting LGBT students in the classroom,” “effective practices for closing achievement gaps,” and “educational equity - the civil rights issue of our time.”

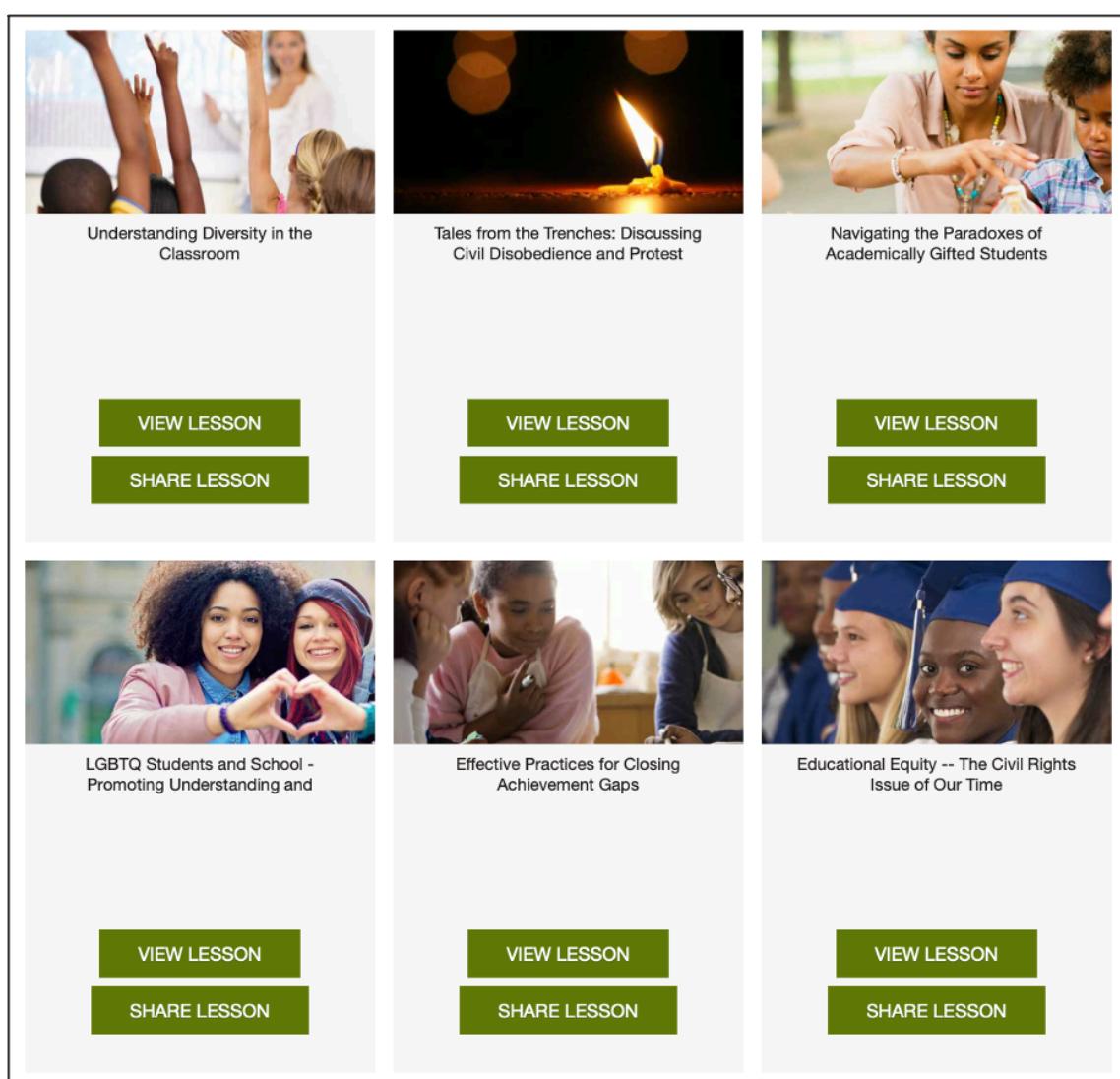


Figure 32. Source: “SEL4ME Lesson Library.” Maine Department of Education.

Figure 33 shows an SEL4ME teacher training on civil disobedience and protest in schools featuring the story of a teacher who allowed students to break their school's dress code to protest the killing of Trayvon Martin. The inclusion of such a story in publicly

available teacher trainings for Maine teachers sends the message that the Department of Education prioritizes student activism and expression over following school rules.

The screenshot shows a website with a dark header. On the left is the SEL4ME logo with the tagline "Social Emotional Learning with Intention." On the right are links for Home, Support, Resources, Account, and Logout. Below the header is a blue banner with the title "Tales from the Trenches: Discussing Civil Disobedience and Protest". Underneath the banner is a section with a speaker icon and the text: "Civil disobedience can be a very tricky topic. We must encourage students to speak out against injustice while holding them back from turning into the very mob they despise. In the midst of their anger and indignance, there is a fire to be harnessed—a way to turn a weapon of destruction into a constructive tool. My teachable civil disobedience moment came on the anniversary of Trayvon Martin's death at the hands of George Zimmerman." This is followed by a paragraph about the teacher's context and a specific event in February 2014. The text continues with a discussion about Dr. King and the assignment, concluding with the teacher's perspective on it being the best teachable moment ever.

SEL4ME
Social Emotional Learning with Intention. Maine Education

Tales from the Trenches: Discussing Civil Disobedience and Protest

Tales from the Trenches: Discussing Civil Disobedience and Protest

Civil disobedience can be a very tricky topic. We must encourage students to speak out against injustice while holding them back from turning into the very mob they despise. In the midst of their anger and indignance, there is a fire to be harnessed—a way to turn a weapon of destruction into a constructive tool. My teachable civil disobedience moment came on the anniversary of Trayvon Martin's death at the hands of George Zimmerman.

A bit of context: I teach in an alternative middle school. My seventh and eighth graders reach my classroom after drug arrests, physical assaults on students or staff, weapons charges and anything else worthy of expulsion. We enter through a metal detector daily and have an armed officer in the building at all times. I am female, in my late thirties, and white; most of my students that year were black or Hispanic. I make it work: I hold written rap battles with my students to open the door to poetry. We translate the Declaration of Independence into an abusive relationship breakup letter. Generally speaking, it's a pretty tough crowd.

It was February 26, 2014—exactly two years after Trayvon Martin was killed. A number of my students wanted to wear their hoods up in honor of Trayvon, despite the fact that wearing a hood goes against dress code. I did not want to discourage them from making a statement—they had found a means of civil disobedience that harmed no one and destroyed no property, and I was proud of them for it. The question was: How could I make it meaningful?

We opened a discussion about what they wanted to do. I pointed to Dr. King, and I asked how we know what he stood for. "If he had only marched down a bunch of streets," I asked them, "if he had stood against fire hoses and got arrested without saying anything, would he have been as effective? What made him a leader?" The students identified that his power and his leadership rested in his speeches. He articulated the injustices, identified the problems, and offered solutions.

I told them that I would allow the one-day exemption from dress code, but they must emulate Dr. King to get the pass. To be allowed their hoods, they had to write a paragraph explaining what they were trying to say with their action—what the injustice was, why it was wrong, and a suggestion or two for what it might take to correct it. I wanted them to be empowered with the means to explain and persuade others—to be more than just a kid with a hood up, breaking a rule.

Despite the fact that the assignment was optional, every student in my class wrote a paragraph that day—even students who didn't even have hoods to put up. They walked away feeling heard and vindicated. I left knowing that each of them had taken one single step toward handling their issues without violence. We spent our warm-up time for the rest of the week examining the leadership and example set in Dr. King's speeches.

It was, in my experience, the best teachable moment ever.

Figure 33. Source: Source: "SEL4ME Lesson Library." Maine Department of Education.

The Maine Department of Education's social-emotional learning webpage also contains a subsection focused on its implementation.²⁴⁶ They state that while Maine does not have Maine Learning Results/Standards based around social-emotional learning, they provide links to those from California and Minnesota as examples to which educators can refer. CASEL, however, claims that the Maine Department of Education's Early Learning and Development standards developed in 2015 include social-emotional learning competencies and standards for pre-K to grade 3 students.²⁴⁷

On March 11, 2022, the Maine Department of Education celebrated "#SELDay." Their website stated, "on #SELDay, educators, community partners, and families across the globe will collectively take a few moments to intentionally build a greater awareness for the importance of social-emotional learning for helping to cultivate a strong sense of humanity." As part of #SELDay, the Maine Department of Education provided a PDF of social-emotional learning resources for educators teaching children in grades Pre-K through 12, and held events throughout the day such "A Historical Perspective of Maine's SEL Journey," "SEL for School Nurses," and "Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and SEL."²⁴⁸ This degree of celebration of what is purported to be just another approach to education, ought to raise some suspicions.

Academic Learning Takes a Backseat

In March 2023, Commissioner of Education Pender Makin spoke before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee at the State Capital in Augusta. Toward the end of the hearing, Republican lawmakers asked Commissioner Makin whether there was a tradeoff between the new focus on ideological topics like diversity, equity, and inclusion and social-emotional learning, and students mastering the basics of education. She responded:

I would say it really does come down to brain science. Every child in the room needs to feel safe. If one person doesn't feel safe in the room, the children who feel pretty safe and sure about themselves feel less safe... Your child who is in a classroom who observes the marginalization or bullying or diminishing of another human being, that creates fear in the uninvolved child who is in that setting. It creates conditions that are averse to the high academic goals that we set for our students. And so I think it's really important for educators to pay attention to the classroom climate, to make sure every student is known and respected for who they are in order to know and achieve in very high ways.²⁴⁹

Commissioner Makin was then asked to explain what, in her view, was causing Maine to decline in test scores. Her response was that students' mental health issues and overall disengagement from school was impairing their ability to learn, and that academic learning would consequently take a backseat to social-emotional education.

I don't know if we in Maine are seeing a specific decline. What we are seeing is a huge increase in mental health. We have a crisis of disengagement. Students aren't showing up. Students are showing up and fully disengaged because they're otherwise occupied and their attention is dragged all over the place. Also, there is so much right now pulling on these kids. They also missed at least a year and a half of development. Kids who are under stress and trauma and anxiety are not able to develop the brain architecture to support academic learning until they feel safe. Until they are healthy. Until they are engaged. I think we're at the place where we're trying to make our kids healthy. We're feeding everybody, we're working very hard on the behavioral skills and self-control kids need to have in order to be successful. In order to free up their brain space in the frontal lobe to not be all over the place and to just be able to be calm and to learn. We're working on those pieces, but I think academic learning is definitely going to take a backseat to all of these other pieces.²⁵⁰

While there is no denying that Maine students are currently suffering from high rates of behavioral issues (see [Figure 8](#)) and mental health issues (see [Figure 9](#)), schools are not well-equipped to handle such issues, given that they are staffed with teachers, not psychiatrists.

While social-emotional learning has been presented to educators as a solution to students' mental health and behavioral problems, the evidence for its efficacy is weak, and schools were never intended to function as mental healthcare facilities.

LGBTQ+ Issues in Maine Education

Rising Rates of LGBTQ+ Identification

The percentage of Maine students, particularly girls, who say they are LGBTQ+ has risen substantially in recent years. Figure 34 shows that in 2021, 31 percent of Maine high school girls identified as lesbian, bisexual, or some other sexual identity, and 4 percent identified as transgender. Among high school boys, 11 percent identified as gay, bisexual, or some other sexual identity, while 2 percent identified as transgender. This is a substantial rise from a decade prior, in which only 8 percent of girls and 4 percent of boys identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and transgenderism among teens was such a rare phenomenon that the survey did not ask about it.

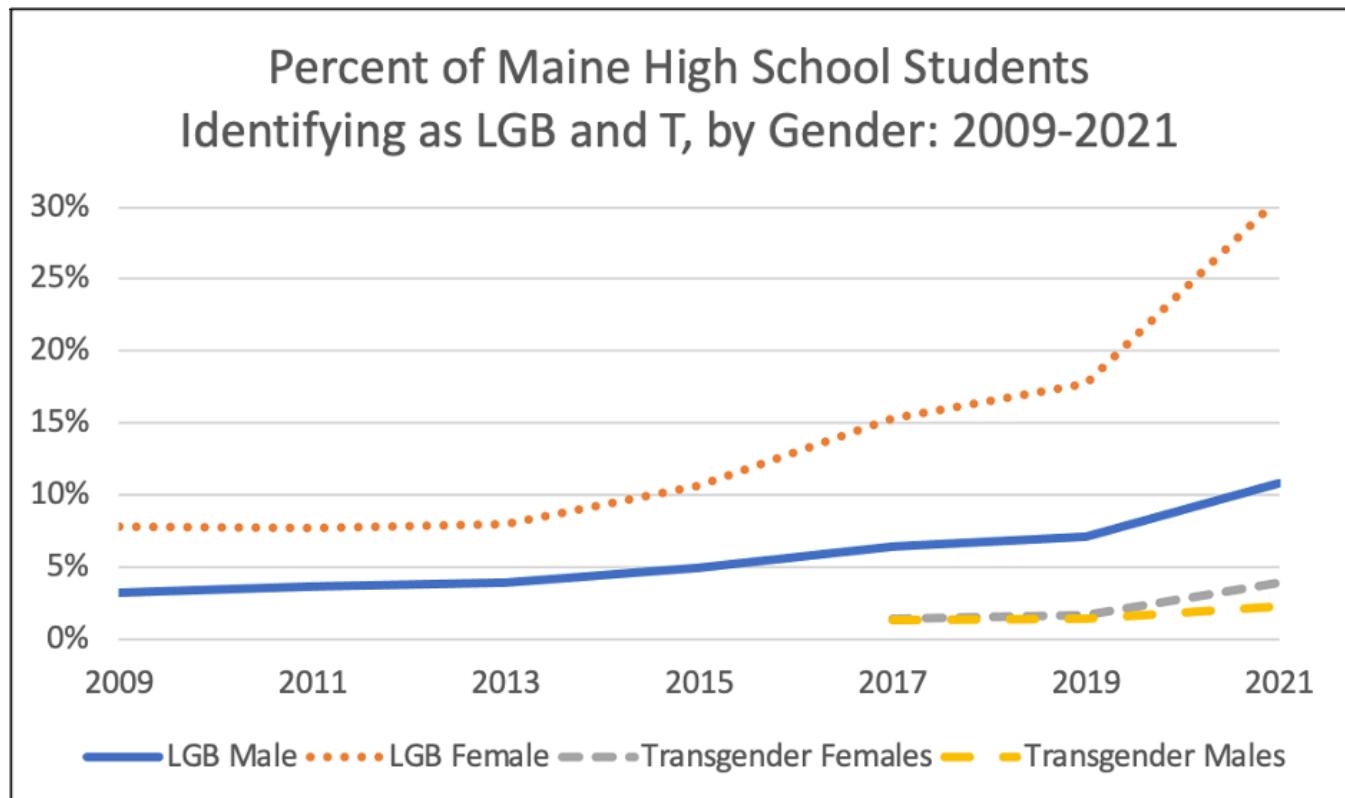


Figure 34. Source: "Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey." Maine Department of Education. Note: The 2021 LGB option included the statement "I describe my sexual identity some other way."

This rise in LGBTQ+ identification occurs at a time when there is serious concern that young people, particularly young girls, are adopting new pronouns and gender identities at school, being affirmed by their teachers and classmates without their parents' knowledge, and then going on to

receive irreversible medical procedures, such as puberty blockers and double mastectomies, which many later come to regret.²⁵¹ Figure 35 illustrates that the number of Maine high school girls who identify as transgender tripled between 2017 and 2021, with one in 25 now identifying as such.

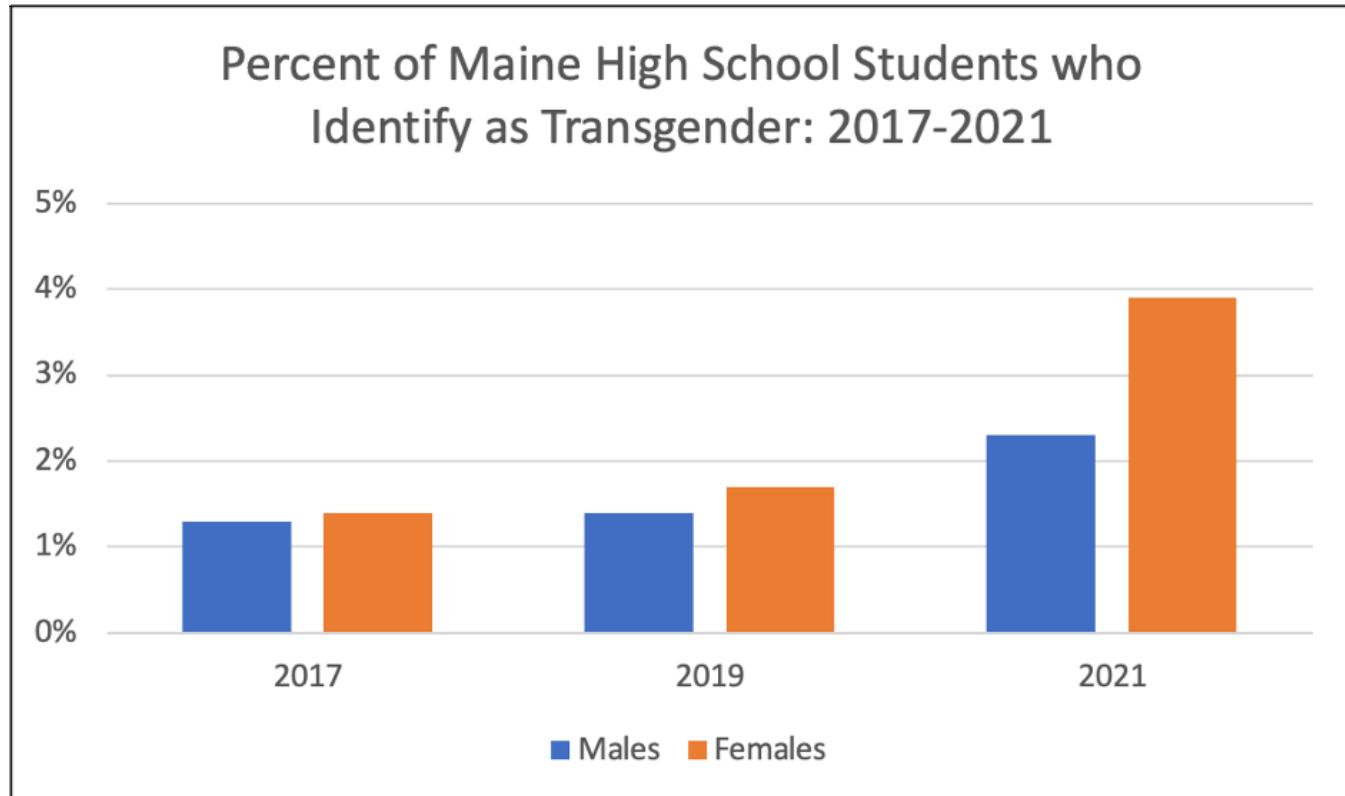


Figure 35. Source: "Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey." Maine Department of Education.

Sexually Explicit Books in Maine Schools

Maine parents have raised concerns in recent months over the presence of books in public school libraries that contain age-inappropriate and sexually explicit LGBTQ+ content. On January 9, 2023, a group of parents in Hermon spoke at a school board meeting to raise concerns over 80+ books on shelves in the school library that they believed to contain sexually explicit material such as *Gender Queer*, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, and *Flamer*. These parents also requested that the school implement an age-rating system for books

made available to students.²⁵² The books in question depict children engaging in sexually explicit acts, some of which center around LGBTQ+ identities and behaviors.

At a school board meeting for RSU 14 on February 15, 2023, an eleven-year-old sixth-grade student read an explicit passage from a book about gay teenagers called *Nick and Charlie* made available to him through his school's library:

I ask if we should take our clothes off, and he's saying yes before I finish my sentence. He's

*pulling off my t-shirt, laughing when I can't undo his shirt buttons. He's undoing my belt. I'm reaching into this bedside drawer for a condom. We're kissing again, we're rolling over... But this reminds me so much of the first time we had sex. We were both fucking terrified and the whole thing was kind of terrible, and we didn't know what we were doing. But it was good too. So good. Because we were a mess of emotions and we were scared and excited and everything felt new. So this sort of feels like that.*²⁵³

The student also said that when he checked the book out of the library to show his father, the librarian asked him if he wanted more books like it and if he wanted a graphic novel version.²⁵⁴

While it is illegal to distribute sexually explicit materials to minors, Maine's obscenity laws provide an exception for schools and other institutions that use them for "purely educational purposes."²⁵⁵

LGBTQ+ Posters in Maine Schools

In recent years, some Maine schools have allowed LGBTQ+ posters to be hung up in classrooms and hallways and posted on social media. For example, Figure 38 shows a sixth-grade classroom at Gorham Middle School which contains a number of posters featuring discussions of gender fluidity, transgenderism, and non-binary identity.²⁵⁶

At Hampden Academy, a poster was hung at the school by the Civil Rights Team telling students that "Broncos don't use someone's deadname because it is disrespectful to their identity" as part of their "Broncos Don't Say" campaign, which also included posters telling students not to say the word retarded, use gay as an insult, stereotype Asians, or say the N-word (see Figure 39).²⁵⁷ Deadnaming refers to the practice of calling someone who has changed genders their birth name, as opposed to their chosen name which matches their preferred gender.

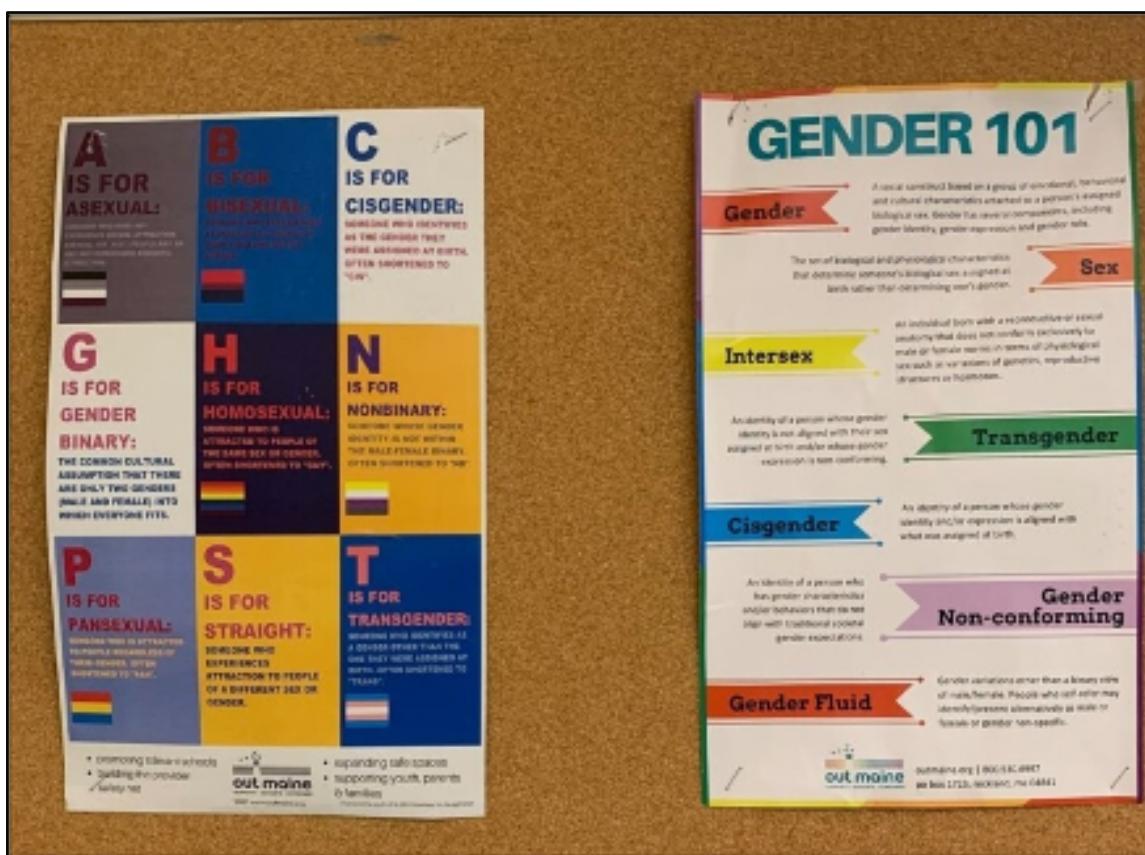


Figure 36. LGBTQ+ posters in Gorham Middle School. Source: Lowell, Robert. 2022. "Gorham School Committee to Rule on Gender Posters." Portland Press Herald.

Maine Department of Education LGBTQ+ Resources

The Maine Department of Education provides resources to educators that help to facilitate the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in classroom curricula. For example, under a section on their website titled “Teaching and Curriculum with a Focus on Diversity,

Equity, and Inclusion,” they include links to resources geared toward increasing the amount of LGBTQ+ content taught in the classroom.²⁵⁸ In addition to the SEL4ME trainings on LGBTQ+ topics discussed in the Social-Emotional Learning section, their website also includes book



Figure 37. Source: “RSU 22 Equity Audit Report.” 2022. Abbott & Associates.

recommendations for teachers looking to create a more “diverse” classroom library, with links to LGBTQ+ reading lists.²⁵⁹

The Maine Department of Education came under fire in May of 2022 for a video that was published on their MOOSE (Maine Online Opportunities for Sustained Education) platform. The video, geared towards children from prekindergarten to grade 2, stated that doctors can “make a mistake” when designating a baby’s gender, leading that individual to identify as transgender as they grow up.²⁶⁰ The MOOSE program was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic as a free online resource for educators in Maine using funds obtained from the federal government through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund.²⁶¹ The

platform also drew criticism for featuring materials claiming President Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan was an example of “covert racism and white supremacy.”²⁶²

OUT Maine

OUT Maine is the main education nonprofit advocating for LGBTQ+ education in Maine’s public schools. They provide training, programming, and resources to schools, school boards, and Gay Straight Trans Alliance clubs, which are present in 60 percent of public secondary schools. Their school staff trainings on “the risks and protective factors of LGBTQ youth” and “how to improve the climate in offices, schools, and practices” have been provided to over 7,000 service providers across the state.²⁶³ They also provide chest binders or breast compression

garments, designed for teenage girls who want to gender transition, to students as young as 14 without parental knowledge or consent.²⁶⁴

In 2022, as part of OUT Maine's "Read the Rainbow" campaign (see Figure 38), they purchased approximately 900 books with LGBTQ+ themes for placement in school libraries across Maine and fundraised to fulfill additional requests that they were receiving from districts.²⁶⁵ The presence of these books in public school libraries sparked controversy among Maine parents, as many are age-inappropriate and some contain sexually explicit content. Figure 39 shows a selection of books donated by OUT Maine, including "Beyond the Gender Binary" and "My Princess Boy."

The Maine Department of Education has in recent years partnered with OUT Maine to provide educators statewide with LGBTQ+-related resources. Using \$2.8 million in federal COVID funding, they created online lessons geared towards young children celebrating LGBTQ+ activism and featuring transgender children such as Jazz Jennings.²⁶⁶ They also partnered to create a plan targeted at rural communities called "Building Welcoming and Affirmative Communities for Maine's LGBTQ+ Youth." The plan aimed to host weekly programs, overnight trips, weekend leadership retreats, and statewide events such as the "Rainbow Ball Weekend," and was designed to help increase the number of Gay Straight Trans

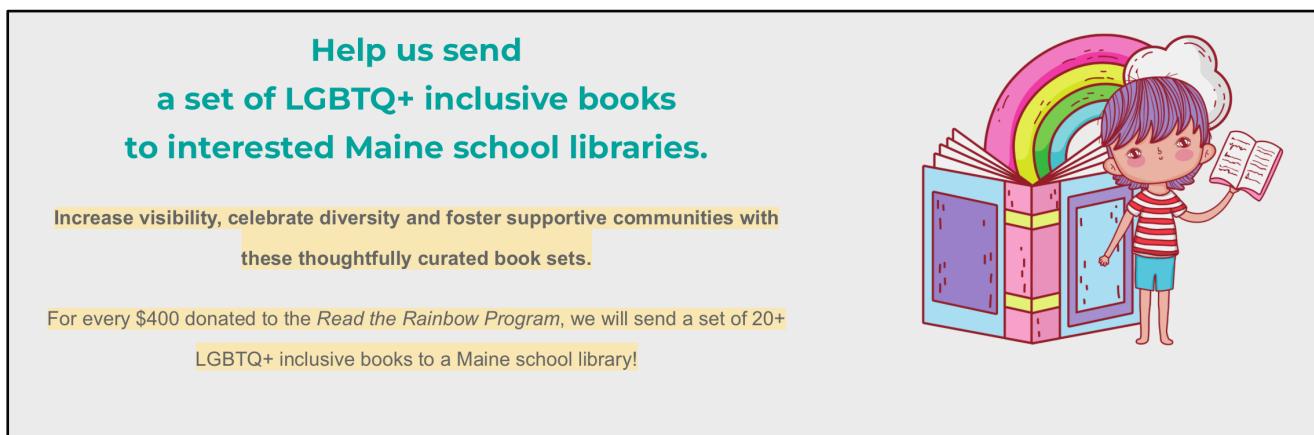


Figure 38. Source: "Read the Rainbow Program." 2021. OUT Maine.



Figure 39. "Selection of books donated by OUT Maine." Source: Abbate, Lauren. 2022. "Rockland LGBTQ Organization Helping School Libraries to Shelf more Inclusive Books." Bangor Daily News.

Alliance clubs in Maine. It also resulted in the creation of a recommended curriculum suggesting books on gender transitioning to kindergarten-age students, as well as books on family diversity and polyamory to those in kindergarten through second grade.²⁶⁷

School-Facilitated Gender Transitions

On October 10th, 2022, the Maine Department of Education proposed a new Chapter 117 rule regarding the duties of social workers and guidance counselors. The rule was an attempt to codify the qualifications and duties of school counselors and social workers by defining the positions, specifying education and training requirements, and outlining their roles and responsibilities.²⁶⁸

The ruling included a provision that discussions between a student and their school guidance counselor or social worker were “privileged communication,” and could not be required to be divulged to that child’s parent or guardian unless the child was being abused or neglected, at risk of harming themselves or others, or engaged in illegal activity. While privileged communication between students and counselors had been protected by state statute since 1989, its inclusion in the new Chapter 117 rule sparked concern from Maine parents worried about counselors concealing students’ gender transitioning from their parents, as there had been documented cases of this happening in Maine schools since the pandemic:²⁷⁰

- Sam Roy, an unlicensed social worker for Great Salt Bay Community School, helped a 13-year girl transition, told school staff to address the girl with male pronouns, and secretly supplied her with a chest binder intended to hide and constrict her breast growth. He and the school hid this from the mother, who sued the school after finding out.²⁷¹
- Kate Turpen, a guidance counselor for the Massabesic schools, told a father at an RSU 14 school board meeting concerned about counselors secretly transitioning children that

she would be willing to provide a chest binder to his daughter without informing him.²⁷²

- A guidance counselor at Winslow High School emailed her colleagues requesting assistance for a female student who wanted to be called by a male name and he/they pronouns. The counselor asked them not to share this information with the student’s parents.²⁷³

When Chapter 117 came before Maine’s Education and Cultural Affairs committee, a majority of those testifying testified against it on the grounds that counselors and schools should be informing parents when their child wants to gender transition rather than keeping it a secret. Those testifying in favor argued the bill was a necessary clarification of the duties of counselors and social workers. The committee ultimately voted to ratify Chapter 117.

Relevant to the deliberations over Chapter 117 and the cases of guidance counselors concealing students’ gender transitions from parents is the fact that the Maine Department of Education’s SEL4ME staff training on supporting LGBT students, depicted in Figure 42, explicitly says to never “out” a child to his or her parents. Teachers using or trained with these or similar resources are explicitly told to keep secrets about gender and sexuality from parents.

🔊 Supporting and Including LGBT Students in the Classroom

🔊 Supporting and Including LGBT Students in the Classroom

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👉 **Their parents may not know yet.** Sometimes a student will try being out at school among more accepting peers before coming out to their parents. Some may recognize that their parents would not be accepting and remain closeted far beyond their high school years. **Important:** under no circumstances should you ever out a child to his or her parents, friends, or other teachers. The student will open up in his or her own time when his or her heart can handle the rejection that may come with it.

Handle with care: Some LGBT youth stand on a precipice. For students who come from homophobic households, coming to terms with being gay means facing the fact that in order to take hold of the only thing that has ever made them feel complete, they must give up nearly everything that they have ever known. For too many students, the day they come out to their parents is the last day they spend in their childhood homes. Be on the watch for the couch-surfing, homelessness, and signs of hunger that could arise if a student is kicked out for being gay.

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Figure 40. Source: "SEL4ME Lesson Library." Maine Department of Education.

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