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Education Evolving: Maine's Plan for Putting Learners First

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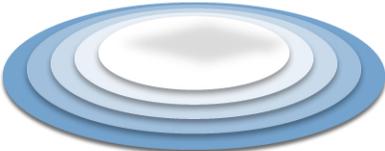
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EducationEvolving

Maine's Plan for Putting Learners First



January 2012

About the Plan

Almost immediately after he was named Commissioner of Education in March 2011, Stephen Bowen traveled to school districts across Maine and spoke to students, teachers, school administrators and community members about what they saw as the challenges confronting Maine's schools and what role they saw for the Maine Department of Education in confronting those challenges.

The introductory essay, which begins on page 3, describes Commissioner Bowen's response to what he heard with regard to the direction Maine needs to take in order to realize the vision of its people being among the best educated in the world, and all its students graduating prepared to succeed in college, careers and civic life.

The impetus for the plan itself came in response to the concern, which the Commissioner heard repeatedly as he spoke with educators and policymakers around Maine, that the Department of Education lacked direction. In response, the Commissioner and Department staff reviewed feedback from the tour of Maine schools, and began organizing that feedback into a handful of core priority areas. The five core priority areas that resulted, described more fully in the pages that follow, were then broken down into subcategories, with specific goals, objectives and action steps attached to each.

In response to concerns that resources are lacking at both the state and local levels to implement a comprehensive and far-reaching strategic plan, efforts were made to ensure that the action steps for each goal and objective flowed from a relatively limited set of overarching strategies. The list below briefly describes the basic strategies used throughout the plan. The specific action steps that accompany each goal and objective provide more detail.

Strategy	Description
Planning and Implementation	Working with stakeholders, the Department will create and implement a detailed plan, including timelines, to advance the stated goal.
Regionalization	The Department will work with communities and school districts to support collaboration and help build regional capacities to advance the stated goal.
Best Practices	The Department will develop strategies to research and report on effective educational practices being used in Maine's schools today.
Collaboration and Communication	The Department will work with stakeholders and other partners to advance stated goals, leveraging technology to share information and best practices.
Policy	The Department will pursue statutory or rule changes to advance goals and objectives.
DOE Initiatives	The Department will strategically target staff and other resources to support the stated goal and objective.

As this plan is implemented, Department staff will collaborate with educators in the field to develop a balanced scorecard to track progress on action steps, the achievement of stated objectives and progress on reaching the goals outlined for each subcategory.

Strategic Plan Framework

Building an education system from the learner out

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

- Rigorous standards and aligned curricula
- Learner-centered instructional practices
- Assessment systems that provide timely, accurate data on achievement and growth
- Information systems that track learner growth over time.

Great Teachers and Leaders

- Standards for teacher and leader effectiveness
- Initial preparation and professional development programs that are rigorous, relevant, and data driven
- Next-generation evaluation systems for teachers and leaders
- Communities of practice designed to foster continuous improvement

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

- Advancement based on demonstration of mastery
- Student voice and choice in the demonstration of learning
- Expanded learning options
- "Anytime, anywhere" learning

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

- Effective and efficient services for learners with special needs
- Coordinated health and wellness programs
- A commitment to community and family engagement
- Career and workforce partnerships

Coordinated and Effective State Support

- Seamless integration of educational programs from early childhood into adulthood
- Adequate and equitable state resources for Maine's schools
- Comprehensive integration of technology
- A robust and transparent accountability and improvement system



Maine Department of Education, 2012

The Case for Change

The Challenges We Face and a Way Forward

For generations, the educators in Maine's public school system have worked tirelessly to meet the educational needs of the students in their care, and their unwavering effort has been evident. Maine's schools routinely score highly in national rankings of educational outcomes and Maine people have a long history of strong support for their local schools.

However, a new age is upon us. Where our schools once needed to prepare young people for work in a predominantly natural resource-based economy of forestry, farming and fishing, they must now prepare students for a global economy in which many of the jobs of Maine's past have become automated or moved offshore. Maine's young people need an entirely new set of skills to succeed in an information-age economy where ideas and innovation move at the speed of light. These new skills are not just related to advances in technology, they are a product of the way society and business work and think: flatter organizations that require more independent thinking and problem-solving; collaboration with people and teams across the aisle and in offices around the globe; and more advanced critical thinking, even in jobs that once were considered manual labor and did not even require a high school degree.

This new age poses a series of challenges that will require us to not simply reform our schools, but to re-imagine them; to build on the successes of the past while creating a model of schooling for this new age.

Challenge 1: Our schools are struggling to accomplish what they need to accomplish

The first challenge we confront is that when one measures the success of our schools using the traditional indicators—test scores, graduation rates, and so forth—Maine may well exceed the national averages, but forward progress is slow. Test scores are essentially flat, and graduation rates, while up slightly, are gaining too slowly.

The most recent set of results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics at the United States Department of Education, show that the percentage of fourth graders in Maine scoring proficient or better in reading is lower today than it was 20 years ago. Reading proficiency levels for the state's eighth graders have dropped as well. In math, proficiency levels are trending up, but even today, only 45 percent of Maine's fourth graders are proficient or better in math, a rate that drops to just 39 percent by eighth grade.

Maine's high school graduation rate has edged up slightly in recent years, but remains unacceptably low. Too many of Maine's young people fail to complete high school, and too many who do complete high school do not have the knowledge and skills they need to move onto college and careers. The state's higher education institutions report that a shockingly high percentage of incoming students require remedial coursework. The Maine Community College System, for instance, reports that a majority of the students it enrolls right out of high school—51 percent—require some kind of additional academic support. They simply are not prepared to do college-level work.

Employers also express concern that recent high school graduates lack many of the skills the modern workforce requires. Employers interviewed by author Tony Wagner for his book *The Global Achievement Gap* report that students graduating from the nation's high schools struggle with complex and critical thinking, labor to communicate effectively and work productively in teams, and often lack the capacity to think in the kinds of creative and innovative ways the information-age economy requires.

It is important to point out that our schools are not struggling due to a lack of effort. Educators in Maine and across the nation are working harder than ever. As Wagner argues, our schools are not failing, they are simply obsolete: They were built for a bygone era, and the world of the 21st century requires something new.

Challenge 2: Recent efforts to improve schools have come up short

The second challenge facing us is that the steps we have taken to address the problems of our struggling schools have not only failed to make our schools more effective, they have largely made things worse.

In an attempt to turn our schools around, for instance, policymakers instituted high-stakes testing. Today, we grade the effectiveness of schools based on how well students do on standardized tests in two content areas: math and English language arts. We test this year's fourth graders, compare how that group performed relative to last year's fourth graders, then make all sorts of determinations about the effectiveness of schools and teachers based on two sets of scores from two different groups of students in two subject areas.

Our schools have responded to this new reality predictably, and logically, given the expectations: By focusing their efforts on and directing their resources to those academic subjects that are tested, often at the expense of other content areas. During tough financial times especially, schools and districts have freed up resources to invest in tested subjects by cutting programs and course offerings in other areas, such as art and industrial arts, music and foreign languages.

The result is a significant student engagement problem. A 2009 Indiana University study found that 67 percent of students report being bored in school *every day*. When asked why they find school boring, the vast majority of students surveyed—82 percent—report a lack of interest in the material being taught. Nearly half report that they do not see how the material is relevant to them.

These recent accountability efforts have had an adverse effect on educators as well. The nation's teachers feel besieged. The public school structure is demanding something from them that's been asked of no previous generation of educators: They're expected to assure that every student in their care reaches the same high level of academic achievement at the same time, regardless of prior learning or life experiences. Their effectiveness at this daunting task is determined to a large degree by scores on standardized tests.

According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, more than 30 percent of beginning teachers leave the profession within five years, and that rate is climbing. The Commission calculates that this "teacher dropout" crisis costs the nation billions of dollars each year.

In short, recent efforts to improve schools through test-based accountability efforts have largely failed. The intense work undertaken to raise test scores in math and language arts has had little discernable impact on those test scores, and worse still, these efforts are driving educators from the profession and have resulted in a narrowing of school curricula at a time when the job creators of the 21st century are calling for more emphasis on creative and innovative thinking and skills.

Challenge 3: Our traditional approach to education is standing in the way of success

That standardized testing and the accompanying accountability provisions of laws like the No Child Left Behind Act have failed to improve our schools to any significant degree, despite the best efforts of the educators working in them, suggests that the challenge we face is more fundamental in nature.

It suggests a design problem. The basic architecture of our system of schooling was established, after all, more than a century ago, for an industrial age that has all but vanished.

In fact, one of the most significant developments impacting the design of public schools was the 1892 report of a group known as the Committee of Ten. This high-profile committee of educators, chaired by the president of Harvard University, released a report in that year that outlined the basic design of our public schools today.

The committee suggested that eight years of elementary school be followed by four years of high school. They recommended that in math, arithmetic should be taught from ages 6 to 13, pre-algebra should be addressed at about seventh grade, and algebra should begin at age 14, followed by geometry. The three-year secondary school science curriculum, they suggested, should begin with biology and earth science, move next to chemistry, and then onto physics.

All of this would seem familiar to a student of today.

The committee's report also declared "every subject which is taught at all ... should be taught in the same way and to the same extent to every pupil." It likewise determined that each subject should be granted "equal time allotment" regardless of how much time a student needed to learn it. This was done, the committee wrote, to preserve the "dignity" of each academic subject. For the Committee of Ten, it was the subject matter to which teachers were to pay homage, not the individual learning needs of their students.

After all, this committee was trying to build a system of schools to meet a set of needs that today is outdated. In that era, it was thought that only an "insignificant percentage" of high school graduates would go on to college. As a result, the ideal school system should "be made for those children whose education is not to be pursued beyond the secondary school."

This approach may well have served the nation's interests a century ago, but the global economy of the 21st century, not to mention the well-being of students and future families, requires far more.

The challenge to be confronted, then, is to build a system that prepares every student for some type of post-secondary education and the high-skill careers of today and the future. To do that, we have to address the core design elements of the system we have – the age-based grade levels, the Carnegie units and seat time, the factory-style bell schedules. We have to address the basic architecture of the industrial-era model of schooling built more than a century ago.

Challenge 4: Change must be achieved within existing resources

As if transforming a century-old model of schooling were not challenging enough, it is clear that we must do so without additional financial resources. Whatever work we do to make our schools better must be done by investing the education dollars we have in new ways.

For years, the nation's public schools enjoyed steady and significant increases in funding year after year. Over the past 40 years, inflation-adjusted spending on public education nationally has essentially tripled. Ongoing spending increases of this kind, though, are a thing of the past. The \$914 million the state has budgeted for General Purpose Aid to Maine's schools for the 2012-13 school year brings the level of state funding to approximately where it was during the 2006-07 school year. Add to that the loss of various forms of federal funding, and Maine's schools will receive less state and federal funding in 2012-13 than they received in 2011-12.

There is little reason to think that this reality will change anytime soon. The federal government is struggling with

massive spending issues, and Maine state government is confronting a shortfall for the current biennial budget that totals more than \$200 million. At the local level, Maine's towns and cities struggle with constant budget pressures as well, and will almost certainly continue for the foreseeable future.

That means waiting for the financial outlook to brighten before taking action is not an option. We – the state Department of Education and Maine's schools and districts – must maximize the use of available resources.

A way forward through a relentless focus on our core priorities

Exciting things are happening today in schools across Maine. Teachers are using new instructional models that build educational experiences around the needs of the learner. Schools are moving away from grouping students by physical age, and are instead developing proficiency-based systems that ensure all students have met learning outcomes at individualized paces. Schools are more fully integrating technology into the classroom, are engaging the broader community in teaching and learning, are using data on student performance to improve student outcomes, and are providing their students with more educational options and approaches.

To build on the great work being done in Maine's schools today, and to move from a century-old model of schooling to a more effective, learner-centered approach in the process, will require a steady focus on a handful of core priorities organized around meeting the individual learning needs of all students.

The plan that follows is arranged into five core priority areas that are organized from the learner out, as the accompanying graphic on page 2 illustrates.

- Closest to the learners are the **instructional practices** used in the classroom. This core priority area concerns the standards and curricula, classroom practices and instructional techniques, assessment of student learning and the use of data to inform decision-making.
- Effective instructional practices can't be applied without **effective teachers and school leaders**, the second core priority area. Ensuring that every student is surrounded by great educators means focusing on the need to provide top-quality preparation and ongoing support to the state's teachers and leaders.
- Building a system of schooling that meets the needs of all students will require building an educational system with unprecedented flexibility and multiple avenues for student success. Creating **multiple pathways for student achievement** must be a central focus of our efforts.
- For learners to be successful, a **comprehensive network of school and community supports** is critical. We must ensure that learners have access to the services they need to be successful and that families and the broader community outside the school walls are engaged as partners in teaching and learning.
- Every effort must also be made to **carefully align the entire educational system** so that learners can move seamlessly from one educational opportunity to the next. Technology must be integrated seamlessly and system-wide, and we must put a new accountability structure into place.

In the plan that follows, each of these core priority areas is further divided into subcategories, with specific goals, objectives and action steps developed for each. The result is a broad set of specific, measurable steps that will move Maine to a new model of schooling. Such a move won't take place through the imposition of heavy-handed mandates or one-size-fits-all approaches from Augusta, but by building on the innovative work being done in schools across Maine already and by employing strategies to increase collaboration and sharing of best practices.

Indeed, we are fortunate in Maine to have a number of schools and districts that have taken promising steps toward making the five core priority areas central to all that they do. We are beginning to see the profound, positive impact this laser-like focus on core priorities can have on individual students. Students in these early-adopting schools and districts are taking an active role in directing their own education.

Their education is taking place in classrooms intentionally designed to foster student engagement and empowerment.

Their learning is facilitated by teachers trained in practices that make expectations transparent. The learning opportunities they are provided meet them where they are and support, encourage, and challenge them.

Making learning experiences like this available to every student in Maine should be our goal. In an era of fiscal challenges, the only way to make that goal a reality is to focus, at both the state and local levels, on those core practices that have the greatest impact on student success.

That is the intent of the plan that follows.

The Core Priorities

Using feedback from Maine’s educators, parents, students, policymakers and Department of Education staff, along with current research and a review of promising practices being used in Maine’s schools today, the plan described in the pages that follow has been organized into the following core priority areas and subcategories, with goals, objectives and action steps for each.

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

1. Rigorous standards and aligned curricula
2. Learner-centered instructional practices
3. Assessment systems that provide timely, accurate data on achievement and growth
4. Information systems that track learner growth over time

Great Teachers and Leaders

1. Common standards for teacher and leader effectiveness
2. Initial preparation and professional development programs that are rigorous, relevant, and data-driven
3. Next-generation evaluation systems for teachers and leaders
4. Communities of practice designed to foster continuous improvement

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

1. Advancement based on demonstration of mastery
2. Student voice and choice in the demonstration of learning
3. Expanded learning options
4. “Anytime, anywhere” learning

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

1. Effective and efficient services for learners with special needs
2. Coordinated health and wellness programs
3. A commitment to community and family engagement
4. Career and workforce partnerships

Coordinated and Effective State Support

1. Seamless integration of educational programs from early childhood into adulthood
2. Adequate and equitable state resources for Maine’s schools
3. Comprehensive integration of technology
4. A robust and transparent accountability and improvement system

Core Priority Area 1: Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

The core of the entire educational enterprise is the teaching and learning that happens in classrooms every day. All of the institutional elements that comprise our system of education—the buildings and busses, the administrative structures at the local, state and federal levels, the schools of education—are in place to support what researchers David Tyack and Larry Cuban call the “core” of schooling, those “daily interactions of teachers and students” where learning takes place.

Unfortunately, school reform proposals seldom focus on the specific instructional practices used on a daily basis by teachers in the classroom. In his 2000 white paper *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*, Harvard’s Richard Elmore describes the “sociology” of schools as being one of “loose-coupling.” While “relatively elaborate systems of administrative overhead at the school and district level” are thought necessary for the “adequate supervision” of classroom teachers, Elmore writes, the “technical core” of teaching—“the detailed decisions about what should be taught at any given time, how it should be taught, what students should be expected to learn at any given time, how they should be grouped within classrooms for the purposes of instruction, what they should be required to do to demonstrate their knowledge, and perhaps most importantly, how the learning should be evaluated”—is largely left to individual teachers themselves. In short, while school boards and school administrators manage the larger system, “teachers, working in isolated classrooms, under highly uncertain conditions, manage the technical core” of teaching and learning.

The result, Elmore argues, is that most of the innovation and improvement that does occur in schools tends to take place in “the structures that surround teaching and learning,” rather than directly impacting “the conditions of teaching and learning for actual teachers and students.” As a consequence, “manifestly successful instructional practices that grow out of research or exemplary practice never take root in more than a small proportion of classrooms and schools.”

This perhaps explains why, despite the determined effort of educators across Maine and the nation, the focus in recent years on improving student achievement in the tested subjects has had little discernable effect in terms of improving student outcomes. Meeting the learning needs of all students will require an unprecedented focus on the broad dissemination of those core instructional practices that result in effective teaching and learning.

This focus, in turn, requires a concentration on four elements that are key to effective instruction:

- Rigorous standards and aligned curriculum – *what students are taught*
- Learner-centered instructional practice – *how students are taught*
- Assessment systems that provide timely, accurate data on achievement and growth – *how student learning is measured*
- Information systems that track learner growth over time – *how instructional practices are adjusted based on assessment data*

In the pages that follow, each of these four elements is explored further, with goals, objectives, and action steps outlined for each.

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

1. Rigorous standards and aligned curricula

The research is clear that high-performing education systems are built around rigorous standards for both content and performance. Maine's *Learning Results* standards, first adopted in 1997, include content standards in eight areas, framed by an overarching set of Guiding Principles that describe the knowledge and skills believed necessary to prepare every student for college, careers and civic life. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2011, Maine joined 45 other states in embracing internationally benchmarked standards for learning in Math and English Language Arts. Maine is also set to take the lead in the development of next-generation science standards, and continues to participate in national efforts to develop and revise standards in all other content areas.

Rigorous learning standards are meaningless, however, unless they inform instructional practice at the classroom level. As Maine transitions to the Common Core State Standards, it is more important than ever that curricula and materials aligned with the state's learning standards are made available to educators across Maine.

Goal: A variety of instructional materials aligned with the Maine *Learning Results* standards, which include the Common Core State Standards, are readily available to and support the instructional practices of Maine educators.

Objective: Fully implement the Common Core State Standards; provide Maine's educators with access to a resource directory of curricula and resources for every content area and level of achievement aligned with the appropriate set of standards.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Planning and Implementation	Develop a detailed plan for the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, which includes targeted training and outreach efforts as well as expanded use of the Maine DOE's website as a resource for standards implementation.	Maine DOE's Common Core implementation team	May 1, 2012
Collaboration and Communication	Establish a state-level, online "Communities of Practice" collaboration platform for developing and vetting standards-aligned curricula and instructional materials, in collaboration with the state's teachers and curriculum coordinators. The venue should allow for the posting and cataloging of standards-aligned curriculum guides, lesson plans, instructional materials and assessment tools.	Maine DOE communications team in cooperation with the state's educators	"Soft" launch by March 1, 2012.
Regionalization	Develop and support regional centers to coordinate implementation of standards and aligned curricula.	Development supported by Maine DOE through the Fund for Efficient Delivery of Education Services	Upon budget approval, state funding available beginning July 1, 2012

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

2. Learner-centered instructional practices

No matter how well curricula and materials are aligned to learning standards, if instructional practices in the classroom fail to engage learners, those learners will still struggle to achieve. There are educators in classrooms across Maine who are pioneering instructional approaches that make learners active participants in and directors of their own learning. In such settings, learners have a meaningful role in planning learning activities and are allowed to choose the manner by which they demonstrate proficiency. Teachers provide learning opportunities and support the customized needs of each child.

Taking such practices to scale will require a renewed focus on teacher training and support, as well as a significant effort to make materials related to learner-centered instruction available to educators statewide. As Maine already has a cohort of school and district leaders pioneering this work, the Department's role should be to support the ongoing work, and to make the lessons learned by these pioneering schools and districts more widely available.

Goal: Learner-centered instructional strategies are in place in all Maine classrooms.

Objective: Provide state support for existing district-level work in learner-centered instruction, and make materials and resources available to all Maine educators to support the proliferation of learner-centered instructional practices.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
DOE Initiative	Appoint a learner-centered instruction team to continue state support for districts already engaged in the development of learner-centered instructional practices and aid districts new to employing such practices.	Maine DOE's leadership team	Team in place by March 1, 2012
Collaboration and Communication	Develop a state-level "Center for Best Practices," with a focus on learner-centered instruction, to serve as a clearinghouse of materials, support and case studies related to learner-centered instructional practices.	Maine DOE's learner-centered instruction and communications teams	Center launched January 1, 2012
Best Practices	Publish learner-centered materials developed by the Center for Best Practices to the Maine DOE website.	Center for Best Practices, communications team	Website with preliminary Center materials launched by February 15, 2012
Collaboration and Communication	Collaborate with Maine teacher preparation programs to expand access to educator training and support related to learner-centered instruction.	Maine DOE learner-centered instruction team, the state's teacher preparation programs	Ongoing

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

3. Assessment systems that provide educators with timely, accurate information on learner achievement and growth

Accurately measuring the individual instructional needs of learners requires a thorough analysis of timely assessment data. Today, learners are assessed using a combination of state and local assessment instruments and a mix of teacher-developed classroom assessments. What is required is a set of modern assessment tools to provide teachers and administrators at both the Pre-K and K-12 levels the accurate data needed to make appropriate decisions regarding instructional practice. New assessment tools must assess higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills, not simply rote memorization.

Maine is one of the states leading the development of the SMARTER Balanced assessment system, which will ultimately not only replace the state standardized tests in place today, but also provide educators with formative assessment tools designed to inform instructional practice throughout the school year. Implementation of the SMARTER Balanced assessment system, as well as assessment systems for those subject areas not included in SMARTER Balanced, will require a significant statewide training and support effort.

Additionally, expanding access to high-quality, teacher-developed assessment tools could be greatly enhanced by the development of a statewide resource directory of such assessment tools, organized and indexed to the *Learning Results* and Common Core, and accompanied by associated lesson plans and learning materials.

Goal: All of Maine educators have access to modern, 21st-century assessment systems and use assessment information to inform instruction.

Objective: Successfully transition to the SMARTER Balanced assessment system, and develop a state-level resource directory of teacher-developed assessment instruments aligned with the state's *Learning Results*, which include the Common Core State Standards.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Planning and Implementation	Develop a comprehensive plan for the statewide implementation of the SMARTER Balanced assessment system.	Maine DOE assessment team, in collaboration with educators and stakeholders	Implementation plan due September 1, 2012
Communication and Collaboration	Use online Communities of Practice to support the development of a resource directory of teacher-developed assessment tools, including rubrics and examples of student work, organized and aligned with the state's academic standards.	Maine DOE learner-centered instruction and communications teams, in cooperation with state's educators	Assessment practice group in place by July 1, 2012
Regionalization	Create regional teacher development centers to coordinate regional training and support in the use of the SMARTER Balanced assessment instruments.	Development supported through Fund for Efficient Delivery of Education Services	Upon budget approval, state funding available beginning July 1, 2012

Effective, Learner-Centered Instruction

4. Information systems that track learner growth over time

Students are assessed repeatedly throughout their academic careers, yet tracking student growth over time is complicated by the lack of a single data system into which assessment data from various state and district sources can be entered. Maine is in the process, however, of developing a Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS), which will be able to track individual student achievement over time, from Pre-K to higher education and the workforce. This will provide educators with invaluable data on student growth, and allow policymakers to measure the effectiveness of the various educational initiatives and programs a learner encounters throughout his or her educational career.

Once the system is in place, a significant effort must be made to ensure that teachers and school leaders know how to make the best use of the data the system provides. Efforts to train educators are already underway and must be expanded as the full deployment of the system draws nearer and more focus is placed on the use of data to inform instructional practices.

Ongoing support for this data system, which was developed with one-time federal grants, must be secured. The state should immediately begin work on a sustainability plan that identifies the ongoing costs to maintain and update the SLDS and makes recommendations for funding and support.

Goal: Maine’s educators have ready access to helpful data and regularly use it to tailor instruction and improve student outcomes.

Objective: Complete the deployment of the State Longitudinal Data System, expand data system training opportunities for educators statewide, and develop a sustainability plan for the system moving forward.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Planning and Implementation	Develop a comprehensive SLDS implementation plan, which outlines the full deployment of the system and related training and support initiatives.	Maine DOE’s SLDS development and communications teams, stakeholders	Plan due July 1, 2012
Regionalization	Develop and provide support for regional centers to coordinate implementation of SLDS training initiatives, with a specific focus on the use of SLDS and other data to inform instructional practices.	Development supported through Fund for Efficient Delivery of Education Services	Upon budget approval, state funding available beginning July 1, 2012
Planning and Implementation	Develop SLDS sustainability plan that calculates ongoing system costs, identifies potential sources for funding and support.	SLDS development team	Plan due December 1, 2012

Core Priority Area 2: Great Teachers and Leaders

Systemic changes to standards, curricula, instructional practices and assessment will achieve little if efforts are not made to ensure that every learner has access to highly effective teachers and school leaders.

Research from around the globe makes clear that educator effectiveness has a profound effect on achievement. Indeed, the findings suggest that no other school-based factor is more important to learner outcomes than the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. In a recent report, the Washington-based Center for American Progress found that “effective teachers are critical to raising achievement and closing longstanding gaps among student subgroups. Indeed, the research on this point has become absolutely clear: Students who have three or four strong teachers in a row will soar academically, regardless of their racial or economic background, while those who have a sequence of weak teachers will fall further and further behind.” The impact of effective school leaders is just as profound.

As a consequence of these findings, teacher and leader effectiveness have become a central focus of federal education policy in recent years. At the center of the Obama administration’s Race to the Top initiative was a significant emphasis on policy related to teacher and leader effectiveness. States wishing to take advantage of the flexibility the administration is now offering around some key aspects of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act will be required to develop detailed guidelines related to teacher and leader evaluation and require that local districts adopt evaluation systems consistent with state guidelines.

Improving teacher and leader effectiveness will require the development of a comprehensive system of training and support that begins with rigorous preparation programs and follows teachers and leaders throughout their careers.

Within this core priority area are four subcategories related to different aspects of teacher and leader effectiveness:

- Common standards for teacher and leader effectiveness
- Initial preparation and professional development programs that are rigorous, relevant, and data driven
- Next-generation evaluation systems for teachers and leaders
- Communities of practice designed to foster continuous improvement

Great Teachers and Leaders

1. Common standards for teacher and leader effectiveness

Advancing the cause of teacher and leader effectiveness means first defining what effective teaching and school leadership looks like. Through our *Learning Results*, Maine set standards for what its students should know and be able to do. It has not, however, established in law what its teachers and school leaders should know and be able to do.

Fortunately, educators across the nation have done a significant amount of work in this area, and several Maine school districts are piloting efforts to define performance expectations for their educators. In 2011, the Council of Chief State School Officers released an updated version of the core teaching standards adopted by the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC). This effort comes on the heels of the release, in 2008, of an updated version of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards for school leaders (ISLLC). Other national organizations, such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, have developed and released standards of their own.

Maine should take advantage of these efforts and join the community of states that have adopted clear standards for teacher and school leader effectiveness. Next, efforts should be undertaken to use these standards as the basis for aligning the state’s policies regarding approval of teacher preparation programs, teacher and leader certification and recertification, the employment of educational personnel and their evaluation, mentoring, and ongoing professional

development. This work should be done in close collaboration with stakeholder groups, especially those representing teachers and school leaders.

Goal: Educator preparation, training and evaluation are informed by a common understanding of effective teaching and leadership.

Objective: Adopt state standards for teacher and leader effectiveness and align state statute and rules accordingly.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Policy	Develop state standards for teacher and leader effectiveness for adoption by the Maine Legislature.	Maine DOE, in collaboration with stakeholders	By completion of 2012 legislative session
Policy	Establish plan to update related rule chapters in order to ensure that effectiveness standards are fully implemented in rule and policy. Goal to have all rules and policy updated within five years.	Maine DOE, State Board of Education, stakeholders	Implementation plan due September 1, 2012
Collaboration and Communication	Develop plan to publicize effectiveness standards; feature examples of effective teaching and school leadership in online Communities of Practice.	Maine DOE communications team to develop publicity plan	Plan due September 1, 2012

Great Teachers and Leaders

2. Initial preparation and ongoing professional development programs that are rigorous, relevant, and data-driven

Today, the availability and effectiveness of both initial preparation and professional development programs for teachers and leaders vary dramatically. The goal should be to have high-quality initial preparation programs that are research-driven and classroom-based, as well as ongoing professional development opportunities for in-service educators that are rigorous, relevant, and directed, as much as possible, by real-time data on the needs of both learners and educators. The state's recent struggles with learner outcomes in reading, for example, might be addressed by strengthening pre-service and in-service educator training in evidence-based reading instruction and implementing the other recommendations of Maine's forthcoming comprehensive state literacy plan.

Such training opportunities should take place, as often as is practical, in the schools where educators do their work. Effective preparation and ongoing training for Maine's early childhood educators are especially critical needs.

Providing leadership training and development has been a challenge as well. While preparation programs for school leaders tend to focus on administration and management, a more pressing need in an era of real change is training and support related to leadership in executing transformations. Moving from a century-old model of schooling to a proficiency-based, learner-centered model of education will require fundamental change, and such change will require training in change leadership.

Making high-quality training and support for teachers and leaders more readily available will almost certainly require building some regional capacity to deliver it. The state should pursue the creation of regional teacher development centers as a means of maximizing training and professional development resources, while still connecting such opportunities to the specific instructional needs of local teachers and school leaders.

Goal: Maine educators are consistently supported through high-quality training and professional development.

Objective: Expand access to high-quality initial and ongoing training and professional development for teachers and school leaders, with a specific emphasis on transformation leadership and on effectively and efficiently meeting the training and support needs of all educators.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Policy	Amend the Chapter 114 rules governing state approval of teacher preparation programs, with the goal of improving the rigor and relevance of such programs.	Chapter 114 stakeholder group, Maine DOE, State Board of Education	By completion of 2012 legislative session
Planning and Implementation	Complete Maine’s comprehensive state literacy plan and implement its recommendations.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders	Plan under development; implementation to begin fall of 2012
Regionalization	Develop and provide support for regional teacher development centers to coordinate and conduct regional professional development opportunities for teachers and school leaders.	Development supported through Fund for Efficient Delivery of Education Services	Upon budget approval, state funding available beginning July 1, 2012
DOE Initiative	Develop an annual state-level “leadership academy” for school and district leaders, with a specific focus on change leadership.	Maine DOE, in collaboration with stakeholders, business leaders	Initial leadership academy to take place summer, 2012

Great Teachers and Leaders

3. Next-generation evaluation systems for teachers and leaders

In its landmark 2009 study of educator evaluation systems, *The Widget Effect*, The New Teacher Project concluded that current educator evaluation systems “fail to differentiate performance among teachers,” with the result that “a teacher’s effectiveness—the most important factor for schools in improving student achievement—is not measured, recorded, or used to inform decision-making in any meaningful way.” The same could be said for the evaluation of school and district leaders.

Effective teaching and school leadership require meaningful evaluation of teachers and school leaders. This in turn requires high-quality evaluation systems, administered by trained evaluators, that are fair and that provide clear and constructive feedback, which is then used to improve professional practice. Consistent with the principles outlined in the U.S. Department of Education’s ESEA waiver framework, the State should adopt a common set of guidelines that inform the development, at the district level, of teacher and leader evaluation systems.

The state should also work with districts to develop regional teacher development centers that not only support the training of the evaluators themselves, but make use of evaluation data to design and implement targeted professional development.

Goal: Highly effective educator evaluation systems are in place in every Maine school district.

Objective: Adopt statewide guidelines for locally developed teacher and leader evaluation systems, and support the development of a network of trained evaluators based in regional teacher development centers.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Policy	In consultation with stakeholders, adopt statewide guidelines for teacher and leader evaluation systems, consistent with ESEA flexibility guidance from USDOE.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders, Maine Legislature	Statutory changes made by completion of 2012 legislative session; stakeholder panel to develop detailed guidelines; guidelines in place by January 1, 2013
Collaboration and Communication	Develop teacher and principal evaluation models consistent with adopted state guidelines and post to Maine DOE website.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders	Evaluation models posted to web by April 1, 2013
Regionalization	Develop and provide support for regional teacher development centers to coordinate and conduct training of teacher and leader evaluators, and to design and implement training and professional development activities.	Development supported through Fund for Efficient Delivery of Education Services	Upon budget approval, state funding available beginning July 1, 2012

Great Teachers and Leaders

4. Communities of practice designed to foster continuous improvement

As Harvard's Tony Wagner argues in his book *The Global Achievement Gap*, teaching has been and continues to be a largely solitary practice providing few opportunities for collaboration and sharing of best practices. With the advent of the Internet, the sharing of new ideas and new approaches to teaching can be far more readily facilitated. Instructional materials, research on best practices, and even videos of effective instructional methods can be shared instantly across the state and around the world. Today, though, no single statewide library of such materials exists. At the same time, large volumes of materials are available, but the absence of "curation," context and discussion make it extremely challenging to professionals seeking the right resource.

The Department is already at work developing an online "Communities of Practice" collaboration platform that will allow the state's educators to post instructional resources of various kinds, indexed to the state's *Learning Results*, and available anytime, day or night. The online collaboration platform will allow visitors to browse the work of various practice groups, participate in conversations about the materials and educational practice challenges, and join practice groups where they can more actively participate in ongoing development of education solutions. The platform could facilitate the development of a resource directory of best practices and become home to a collection of webinars and videos on effective instructional practices, while also connecting educators to like sites and resources centers in other states and around the globe. While in development at the moment, an early version of the site should be developed and deployed soon. Growing the platform to allow an unlimited number of self-formed and managed practice groups is the goal of this effort.

Additionally, the state should pursue development of "best practice schools" that can be centers both for research on best practices and for the sharing of effective instructional practices with visiting educators.

Goal: Maine's educators participate easily and often in statewide sharing of instructional best practices and professional development opportunities.

Objective: Develop a state-level, online resource center devoted to the sharing of effective educational practices and professional development resources. Form a network of regional “best practice” schools that develop, implement and promote effective practices.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Collaboration and Communication	Use the online Communities of Practice to facilitate the development of a resource directory for instructional resources and professional development materials.	Maine DOE communications team, in cooperation with the state’s educators	Initial launch of resource directory by April 1, 2012
Best Practices	Develop a “Best Practice School” designation for schools undertaking research and development on effective instructional practices.	Maine DOE, in collaboration with stakeholders	Implementation plan to be developed by September, 2012

Core Priority Area 3: Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

For generations, the adults in our schools have decided what students learn; when, where, and how they learn it; and in what ways they demonstrate what they have learned. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that this approach—in which the learner is obligated to adapt to the educational institution instead of the other way around—simply does not work for many kids. For too long, such a model has prevented too many students from finding success in the school environment.

The system of schools we have today is one in which time is the constant and learning is the variable. Teachers and students are given a fixed period of time in which to cover a fixed curriculum. The result is a model that falls short of meeting the needs of all students. Some students disengage because the pace of the class does not challenge them, while others fail to achieve learning goals because the pace is too fast. As Nicholas Colangelo, Susan Assouline and Miraca Gross write in their 2004 report, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students*, our system of education keeps the most advanced students from reaching their full potential “by forcing them to learn in a lock-step manner with their classmates.” “The evidence,” the authors write, “indicates that when children’s academic and social needs are not met, the result is boredom and disengagement from school.”

Along with being grouped with students of the same age, students are expected to learn in the same physical setting as all other students in their community: in a brick and mortar elementary school, middle school, and high school within defined geographical boundaries. Within the physical structure, learning in one content area is often completely separate from learning in another: Math is learned in math class and civics in civics class. Credit is earned by sitting in certain classes for certain periods of time.

In a learner-centered, proficiency-based system, students advance upon demonstration of mastery, rather than remain locked in an age-based cohort that progresses through a fixed curriculum at a fixed pace, regardless of learning achievement.

The good news is that schools and districts across Maine and the nation are already implementing a learner-centered instructional approach, one that provides learners with more say in their education, more choices about how, where and when they learn, and more opportunities for them to demonstrate success anytime, anywhere. The work of these educational pioneers, who are providing customized experiences for each student, should be studied. Best practices in learner-centered, proficiency-based instruction should be developed, shared, discussed, and constantly improved.

Additional steps must be taken to provide learners with every opportunity to succeed. Learners must be partners in and directors of their own learning. They must help to design learning activities and have some say in how that learning will be evaluated. For example, schools across Maine already make use of “capstone projects”—interdisciplinary, theme-based assessment instruments designed, at least in part, by the students themselves.

As we move away from the factory-era, assembly line model of schooling, we must also begin moving away from the practice of having the student’s street address serve as the primary determinant of the school that student attends. Expanding school choice options, such as charter schools, meets this goal. Moreover, we need to move away from a model where the only place that learning is recognized as having happened is in school. More than any previous generation, this generation of young people will be one of lifelong learners, acquiring new skills and processing new information as a routine part of life. The technological age in which we now live will provide this generation of learners with access to a variety of learning options and opportunities that is without precedent in human history. Already, through the Internet, students have access to an enormous variety of learning options, including online courses delivered at little or no cost from all over the world. The idea that the learning that takes place outside the walls of the school somehow doesn’t “count” is yet another idea whose time has come and gone.

Truly embracing a “learning without barriers” model will mean more flexibility within the walls of the school and more opportunities for learning outside the walls. It will require a new architecture for learning, one that involves new ways of

organizing students for instruction, new ways to assess student learning, and new learning opportunities both within the existing structure of schools and beyond it.

A system that fully recognizes multiple pathways for a student to achieve will embrace the following four tenets:

- Advancement based on demonstration of mastery
- Student voice and choice in the demonstration of learning
- Expanded learning options
- “Anytime, anywhere” learning

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

1. Advancement based on demonstration of mastery

For as long as anyone can remember, learners have been organized into groups by age. They move through school in age-based cohorts in lockstep, whether they fully understand what is taught or not. As a consequence, students who have already mastered certain content must wait for the others to catch up, while those who have yet to fully understand a certain concept are pushed to move on anyway. What is needed is a move to a learner-centered, proficiency-based system in which learners advance only when they have demonstrated mastery of defined learning outcomes.

Transitioning from the age-based grade level model, which has been in place for more than a century, to something new will take a sustained effort over a number of years. Luckily, there are already schools and school districts here in Maine leading the way by moving forward with proficiency-based systems. The state should take an active role in supporting these efforts, undertaking research on this new approach and reporting outcomes. The Department’s new Center for Best Practices, supported by grant funds, should study and report on the work of Maine districts implementing a proficiency-based model. Through the online Communities of Practice collaboration platform, to be developed by the Department in 2012, materials and resources related to proficiency-based models can be shared. The platform can also provide a platform for professional discussion and development connected to those materials.

Since the adoption of the Maine *Learning Results* standards back in 1997, the Maine Legislature has envisioned a true, proficiency-based system, including a standards-based high school diploma. If Maine is serious about moving in this direction, legislation will need to be adopted that moves the state away from age-based grade levels and Carnegie units as a measure of academic progress at the high school level. Statutory language should be adopted embracing a true standards-based high school diploma.

Goal: All Maine students learn in a proficiency-based model that allows them to move at their own pace and advance when they have mastered learning outcomes.

Objective: Develop and implement a comprehensive set of state policies and supports to aid schools and school districts as they move from an age-based model to a proficiency-based model of schooling.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Best Practices	Establish a Center for Best Practices at the Maine DOE to focus on research and reporting related to proficiency-based systems here in Maine.	Maine DOE	Center launched January 1, 2012
Collaboration and Communication	Use the online Communities of Practice to share resources and best practices related to proficiency-based learning.	Maine DOE, districts piloting proficiency-based learning	Online practice group on proficiency-based learning in place by May 1, 2012
Planning and Implementation	Establish a learner-centered instruction team at the Maine DOE, tasked with coordinating support for proficiency-based districts and establishing a communications strategy related to proficiency-based systems.	Maine DOE	Team in place by March 1, 2012, communications plan adopted by June 1, 2012
Policy	Adopt statutory language requiring proficiency-based high school diplomas by a date certain.	Maine DOE, Maine Legislature	By completion of 2012 legislative session

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

2. Student voice and choice in the demonstration of learning

A truly learner-centered model of schooling allows for advancement based on demonstration of mastery. It also makes the learner a partner in determining not just the learning activities to be undertaken but the means by which that learning is to be demonstrated.

In schools across Maine and the nation, some variation of this model already exists. In high schools, especially, students are often asked to design culminating experiences such as senior theses or capstone projects. Such projects are generally conducted in collaboration with faculty advisers, are often interdisciplinary in nature, and are typically shared or presented in a public forum. The intent of such projects is not only to demonstrate the application of student learning, but to mirror the kind of work typically found in the world beyond high school, where one applies skills and knowledge from a variety of content areas to create a new product or new meaning.

To ensure that assessments of student learning are valid and reliable, efforts must be made to develop standards for learner-designed, performance-based assessments, and to provide both teachers and students with exemplars of such assessments, including examples of student work.

The state can play a role here, using the online Communities of Practice to develop a clearinghouse of such assessment tools. The ability to upload video clips and other materials to the platform will allow for the posting of exemplars of student work. The potential also exists for professional development opportunities to be made available that allow teachers to score student-developed projects online, using a common rubric, and compare the score they give to the scores of others.

In pursuing this work, policymakers need to take care to avoid the mistakes of the “local assessment systems” initiative of the early 2000s, which, in an attempt to provide local control over student assessment, created an extraordinary amount of work for teachers and school leaders. Efforts should be made to take full advantage of modern technology to make available to educators a wide variety of learner-centered assessment approaches.

Goal: Learner-designed assessments are used in schools across Maine, making students active participants in setting and meeting expectations.

Objective: Provide Maine’s educators with access to exemplars of valid, student-developed assessment tools and expand professional development opportunities related to the implementation of such assessment systems.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Collaboration and Communication	Use Online Communities of Practice to share resources and best practices.	Maine DOE, districts piloting proficiency-based learning	Creation of relevant practice group by May 1, 2012

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

3. Expanded learning options

Today, all public schools are required to provide students the opportunity to attend Career and Technical Education (CTE) and access its rigorous career preparation programming. Adult Education programming and the post-secondary options it offers are also prevalent throughout the state. School systems create additional educational options as well, in the form of alternative schools. In addition, thousands of Maine students can choose the schools they attend, and with the passage of recent legislation, Maine will soon allow the development of public charter schools, creating yet another educational option for learners.

While learning opportunities such as these may provide many students with a more appropriate educational setting, access is often limited. Every effort must be made to ensure that students can access a wide array of rigorous, proficiency-based educational programming, both within the resident school unit and outside of it.

And while schools today typically “count” only the learning that happens within school walls during the school day, a learner-centered educational system recognizes that learning takes place in many settings at all times of the day. More than any generation before it, this generation of young people will have access to countless learning opportunities, presented in a variety of settings. Schools are only beginning to move in this direction. They must work collaboratively with families, businesses, community organizations and others to accelerate this evolution and provide all students with rigorous, real-world learning opportunities.

Goal: A wide variety of learning opportunities and settings give all students access to educational options that work for them.

Objective: Establish in statute “multiple pathways” for student achievement that minimize barriers to available education options and ensure access to a broad array of learning options.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Policy	Adopt statutory language to expand student access to CTE and allow students to use Adult Education classes as a path to high school completion.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders, Maine Legislature	By completion of 2012 legislative session
Policy	Adopt statutory language expanding school choice options for Maine students.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders, Maine Legislature	By completion of 2012 legislative session
Policy	Fully implement the state's charter school law, including establishment of State Charter School Commission (SCSC), enactment of Maine DOE bill updating statutory language, final adoption of rules governing charter school development.	Maine DOE, State Charter School Commission, stakeholders	SCSC in place by January 1, 2012, updated statute and rules in place by completion of 2012 session

Multiple Pathways for Learner Achievement

4. "Anytime, anywhere" learning

While schools once had a near monopoly with regard to the provision of educational programs and services, technological advances provide students today with a far wider array of educational options.

Online and digital learning, for example, which allows students to learn at the time, place and pace most effective for them, is growing dramatically. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) reports that "in 2010, over 4 million K-12 students participated in a formal online learning program," and that "online learning enrollments are growing by 46% a year." That growth rate, reports iNACOL, "is accelerating."

While Maine led the way a decade ago with a learning technology initiative that put laptop computers into the hands of tens of thousands of students, the state is falling behind when it comes to digital learning. States across the nation have launched online or virtual schools of one kind or another, and some have even mandated that students take at least one digital course as a condition of graduation. Maine needs a comprehensive digital learning strategy that ensures its students are prepared for the digital age in which they live.

Teachers and school leaders will also need additional knowledge and skills as digital learning becomes more popular and widespread. Efforts should be undertaken to ensure that teacher and leader preparation programs include training in digital learning, and the state's learning technology team should continue its work to provide ongoing professional development opportunities related to digital learning.

As for Maine's schools, if they are to remain relevant in this changing world, they must adopt an approach that recognizes digital learning options and must begin tailoring their own educational programming to allow for "anytime, anywhere" learning. The state can assist in this effort by providing a clearinghouse of digital learning resources and by establishing and reporting on digital learning best practices.

Goal: All Maine learners actively participate in digital learning opportunities that engage them and allow self-directed, self-paced learning.

Objective: As part of a comprehensive digital learning strategy, develop approaches to assist districts in adopting policies and practices that support "anytime, anywhere" learning, including expanded access to digital learning and other educational options outside the classroom.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Planning and Implementation	In collaboration with stakeholders, adopt a comprehensive, multi-year digital learning strategic plan designed to expand access to digital learning opportunities for all Maine students.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders	Complete plan summer of 2012; report recommendations to the 126 th Maine legislature
Collaboration and Communication	Develop and post to Maine DOE website materials and resources related to digital learning best practices.	Maine DOE MLTI team	Ongoing

Core Priority Area 4: Comprehensive School and Community Supports

Surrounding the teaching and learning that take place in classrooms and other educational settings is an extensive network of school and community supports that are critical for learner achievement. In even the most effective teaching and learning environments, learners will still struggle if they lack appropriate support for special learning needs, confront health and wellness issues, have limited access to learning opportunities beyond the school walls, or struggle to see how the work they do in school prepares them for college, careers and civic life. Highly effective school systems integrate these systems of support and interaction in order to ensure that effective teaching and learning can take place.

In many European nations, for instance, not only are health and other services for students more readily available, but fewer barriers exist between schools and the communities they serve. In many such systems, students complete learning outcomes while working in apprenticeships and internships with employers.

Within this core priority area are four subcategories related to providing needed services and supports to students:

- Effective and efficient services for learners with special needs
- Coordinated health and wellness programs
- A commitment to community and family engagement
- Career and workforce partnerships

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

1. Effective and efficient services for learners with special needs

Students with special learning needs require adequate support in order to succeed. But school districts face a daunting challenge in providing those required services: They are under constant pressure to contain rising costs for special education at a time when the number of students with multiple and severe learning and behavioral issues is on the rise.

According to the Fordham Institute, Maine has one of the highest rates of special education identification in the country. At 17.25 percent, Maine's rate well exceeds the national average of 13.14 percent. In fact, only three other states—Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New York—identify a higher percentage of their students as in need of special education services. A sensible first step toward finding efficiencies might be to undertake a detailed study to examine Maine's high rate of special education identification.

Maine also seems to go about providing services to special education students in a very labor-intensive way. The Fordham Institute's report identifies Maine as having one of the nation's highest special education staff-to-student ratios. At 210 staff members for every 1,000 special education students, Maine has the sixth highest ratio in the country, well above the national average of 128 to 1,000. Some of that high staff ratio is almost certainly due to Maine's rural nature, but Fordham does report that there are much larger rural states with much lower personnel ratios. Additional study should be undertaken to determine the extent to which Maine is using cost-effective best practices in the provision of special education services.

Addressing the challenge of providing cost-effective special education services will almost certainly require building more regional capacities around special education administration and service provision. Much the same could be said of services for students with limited English proficiency.

Goal: All students with special learning needs have access to efficient, effective and appropriate services that help them succeed.

Objective: Review current practices with regard to the provision of services to students with special learning needs, and develop regional approaches to the delivery of special educational services, including the development of regional support centers for learners with special educational needs, their parents and families, and the educators who serve them.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Planning and Implementation	Review current special education policy and practices; recommend changes for the next legislative session. Review to include analysis of data regarding special education eligibility, placements, and staffing ratios to determine factors that influence determinations of eligibility and higher-than-average staffing.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders, Maine Legislature	Report due January 1, 2013
Best Practices	Publish a page on Maine DOE website to share evidence-based best practices with regard to special education services.	Maine DOE	September 1, 2012
Regionalization	Use the Fund for Efficient Delivery of Educational Services to pilot models of regional special education administration and services delivery.	Development supported through Fund for Efficient Delivery of Education Services	Upon budget approval, state funding available beginning July 1, 2012

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

2. Coordinated health and wellness programs

The health and wellness of all members of the school community have always been important factors influencing learner achievement and growth. Today, young learners often come to school with myriad physical, developmental, behavioral and emotional health issues. School personnel also are challenged with physical, personal and emotional issues of their own. Schools need to respond by working to coordinate access to a seamless array of health and wellness services for children, families and staff, developed in cooperation with health, counseling, wellness and nutrition resources outside the school walls.

Additionally, every effort must be made to ensure that schools and school districts have access to the latest information and resources on best practices in delivering health and wellness services.

Goal: Coordinated health and wellness programs contribute to a healthy school environment that helps learners make the most out of school.

Objective: Further coordinate, at the state, regional and local levels, school programming in health, wellness, counseling and nutrition.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
DOE Initiative	Review Maine DOE's health and wellness programs. Potentially develop a coordinated student health and wellness office or team at the Maine DOE.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders	Plan due July 1, 2012
Best Practices	Publish a page on Maine DOE website dedicated to sharing evidence-based best practices with regard to health and wellness services.	Maine DOE	September 1, 2012

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

3. A commitment to community and family engagement

The involvement of families and the wider community in a child's education has always been critical to student success. According to the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, repeated studies have found that "through high school, family involvement contributed to positive results for students, including higher achievement, better attendance, more course credits earned, more responsible preparation for class, and other indicators of success in school." Research also suggests that community partnerships, in the form of service learning opportunities, for instance, also have an impact on student outcomes.

Partnerships with the world beyond the school walls are especially important in a learner-centered system of education. Learners will take part in home- and community-based learning opportunities, including online and distance learning, and will be asked to demonstrate mastery of standards through community-centered capstone projects. Community institutions such as libraries need to be engaged in new ways. In order to support the principle of student-centered, anytime, anywhere learning, schools will need to interact with and engage families and communities as never before.

The Department can play a role in advancing engagement efforts by sharing models of effective family and community partnerships. As the Department redesigns its website, for instance, it could create a clearinghouse for best practices in family and community outreach.

The state has an additional resource in the form of the Maine Commission for Community Service, which coordinates various volunteerism and community service programs across Maine. While the Commission is currently housed at the State Planning Office, the administration has put forward a proposal to move it into the Department of Education. Such a move could potentially mean an expansion of the state's capacities to support school and community partnerships.

Goal: Schools and districts are engaged in unprecedented partnerships with families and the broader community as a way to expand learning opportunities for students.

Objective: Expand the state's capacity to support family and community partnerships at the school and district level.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Collaboration and Communication	Publish a page on Maine DOE website dedicated to providing models of family and community partnerships established in schools across Maine and the nation.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders	September 1, 2012
Planning and Implementation	Develop a plan, in cooperation with the Maine Commission for Community Service, to more fully implement school and community partnerships.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with the MCCS	January 1, 2013

Comprehensive School and Community Supports

4. Career and workforce partnerships

Even in this time of high unemployment, employers report that they struggle to find employees with the knowledge and skills the modern workplace requires. The era of the No Child Left Behind Act, with its emphasis on tested academic subjects, has led to a narrowing of school curricula, which has often led to a decline in course offerings in the industrial arts and other fields oriented toward career preparation. Many employers report being interested in hosting school visits or providing students with workplace internships, but find that schools show little interest or have little capacity to take advantage of such opportunities.

Building the workforce of Maine's future will require an unprecedented partnership between employers and educational systems at all levels. Learners should have broad access to opportunities for workforce and career exploration, and educational programs at all levels should work to ensure that their students develop college- and career-ready skills.

Opportunities for students to intern with employers should be expanded and flexible schedules should be created to allow students to apprentice with employers part-time while completing their studies. Efforts should be made to align curricula and coursework at all educational levels in order to create clear college and career pathways for students.

A good first step in this work would be for the Maine DOE to survey school districts, Career and Technical Education centers and adult education programs to determine current practices with regard to career and workforce partnerships. The results of the survey could then be used to develop strategies to expand such opportunities. Efforts should also be undertaken to review state law in order to identify potential barriers to expanding educational opportunities in Maine's workplaces.

Goal: Students commonly access internships, apprenticeships and other opportunities to learn in workplace settings, apply academic lessons and explore potential career fields.

Objective: Develop a set of strategies for the expansion of career and workforce partnerships, based on feedback from school districts and the employer community.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
DOE Initiative	Survey Maine's school districts to identify current practices with regard to business and workforce partnerships.	Maine DOE	End of 2011-12 school year
Planning and Implementation	Use survey results, along with feedback from stakeholders, to develop strategies for expanding access to partnership opportunities.	Maine DOE, working with stakeholders	Strategies developed by September 2012
Policy	Undertake a review of state law and policy in order to identify barriers to career and workplace educational opportunities.	Maine DOE	By 2013 legislative session

Core Priority Area 5: Coordinated and Effective State Support

Far from the classrooms where learning occurs are state-level structures and systems that, while largely unknown to learners, are critical to helping them prepare for college, careers and civic life. Whether they know it or not, learners rely on coherent and consistent structures and policies at the state level that are critical to a high-functioning, learner-centered system of education.

The educational journey that learners take is made far easier when the education systems that serve them work collaboratively to align programs and practices, making the move from one educational setting to another as seamless as possible.

Maine's public higher education institutions, for example, are taking steps to better align with each other and with the state's high schools and Career and Technical Education centers. At the other end of the educational pipeline, Maine's Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant proposal, while ultimately unsuccessful in winning a grant award, established a new cooperative relationship between the state Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services, that will better integrate services for preschoolers. At the high school level, a number of Maine communities are exploring ways to bring higher education facilities to high school campuses so students can easily take advantage of advanced academic opportunities. Work is also underway at the state level to identify funding sources, policies and structures that can allow more of Maine's high school students to participate in post-secondary courses while still in high school.

It is schools and school districts that do the hard work of instructing, assessing and providing for the well-being of students; hiring effective educators, evaluating their performance and allowing them to continue their professional growth; and engaging families and the broader community in service of learning. But for them to do their important work, schools and districts need adequate and effective support from the state.

Most of that support comes in the form of state funding for schools. By approving a 2004 ballot referendum requiring a 55 percent state share of the cost of public education, Maine voters affirmed their support for a significant level of state funding for schools. Unfortunately, Maine has never reached the goal of a 55 percent state share, and the way the state's money is distributed to Maine's schools is a source of constant debate.

An effective state education agency is also important to supporting Maine's public education system. The state Department of Education has a number of regulatory duties it is required to perform under law, but it also must serve to guide and support the work of Maine's educators and school leaders.

One area where the state can play a critical role is in the coordinated integration of technology. A learner-centered educational system requires effective data systems that track learner achievement over time and across multiple educational settings. Unfortunately, local school districts have been frustrated by technology issues at the state level that have stood in the way of compatibility between local and state student information systems and streamlined submission of required data to the state. Efforts must be undertaken to address the data needs of the state's schools and school districts and to work with them to address additional data and technology needs.

Lastly, Maine's public schools need a state accountability structure focused on ensuring and accurately tracking the growth and achievement of each learner. The state recently began that work as part of crafting an application to the U.S. Department of Education for flexibility in implementing the accountability provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The work began with a public survey and three public forums in December 2011 focused on school improvement and accountability. The 1,500 survey responses and other feedback demonstrated a high level of interest in a fair and constructive accountability system that judges student achievement and school performance on multiple measures, rather than on the basis of a single standardized test. The Maine Department of Education has committed to the long-term work of engaging stakeholders in designing an accountability and improvement system that meets those needs.

This core priority area is divided into the following four sub-categories that each details a specific state structure or policy upon which the state's learners and public schools depend:

- Seamless integration of educational programs from early childhood into adulthood
- Adequate and equitable state resources for Maine's schools
- Comprehensive integration of technology
- A robust and transparent accountability and improvement system

Coordinated and Effective State Support

1. Seamless integration of educational programs from early childhood into adulthood

For a learner-centered educational system to function, all the elements of that system must be carefully aligned to allow learners to move at their own pace and have multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency. Too frequently, however, the various pieces of the educational system are disconnected from one another. Early childhood programs are disconnected from the elementary school programs they feed into. A middle school may embrace a learner-centered model, but the high school its students are to attend does not. Barriers are sometimes erected that prevent students from having access to Career and Technical Education programs, or that complicate the transition from high school to post-secondary educational opportunities.

Every effort must be made, from the highest levels, to ensure that educational programs are fully aligned and that they all embrace a model of schooling that puts the needs of the learner first.

Some of this important work is already underway. Last legislative session, lawmakers authorized the creation of a 16-member council on science, technology, engineering and math education, with the goal of better coordinating statewide efforts in these areas at all levels of education. Recent meetings between the Maine DOE and the state's institutions of public higher education have resulted in an agreement to establish a collaborative working group to focus exclusively on post-secondary transition issues. And this past summer, Governor LePage signed an executive order establishing the Task Force on Expanding Early Post-Secondary Access for High School Students in Maine. The task force will soon release a report of initial findings, and intends to continue its work to expand access to early college opportunities.

At the other end of the age spectrum, the state missed out on a federal Race to the Top grant aimed at improving early childhood programming, but state officials intend to move ahead with as much of the proposed work as possible, including the development of a permanent inter-agency working group devoted to coordinating early childhood policies and practices.

Each of these efforts represents a significant step toward a more fully aligned educational system from early childhood into adulthood.

Goal: Maine students are able to move easily through a learner-centered educational system fully integrated from early childhood through adulthood.

Objective: Eliminate as many policy and operational barriers as possible that block access to educational options .

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Collaboration and Communication	Move forward with structural and other reforms as outlined in the state's recent Race to the Top Early Childhood Challenge grant.	Maine DOE, Maine DHHS and stakeholders	Progress report due July 1, 2012
Collaboration and Communication	Create the Education Coordinating Committee's college transitions working group; complete working group's initial report to the ECC regarding college and career readiness initiatives.	Maine DOE, higher education institutions, Education Coordinating Committee (ECC)	Interim report due to ECC May 1, 2012
Policy	Implement the initial findings of the governor's early post-secondary opportunities task force; support the ongoing work of the task force.	Maine DOE, early post-secondary task force	Task force interim report under development

Coordinated and Effective State Support

2. Adequate and equitable state resources for Maine's schools

Under Maine's Constitution, it is the state's "several towns" that are required to "make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the support and maintenance of public schools." A significant state role in K-12 education is essential, however, to ensure that all of Maine's young people, regardless of zip code, have equal access to a high-quality education.

The state supports Maine schools in a number of ways. First, the state provides a considerable amount of funding to local schools in the form of General Purpose Aid (GPA). For the 2012-13 school year, state GPA funding is budgeted to total more than \$900 million.

What constitutes the appropriate level of state funding for schools (and how that funding is then distributed to the state's school districts) is a subject of constant debate in Augusta. Last legislative session, a proposal was put forward to have an independent study of Maine's school funding commissioned, and such a study should be undertaken as soon as sufficient funding can be found to finance it.

Second, the health care needs of students are often supported by the state's Medicaid program, MaineCare. Yet in recent years, MaineCare policy changes at the state level have had an enormous impact on the capacity of schools to provide needed health services. Still, today Maine's school districts and the wider health care community remain uncertain about current MaineCare policies and procedures. The state Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services must partner in new ways to ensure that schools and health care providers have access to clear policies and procedures around the use of MaineCare funding.

Third, Maine's schools are supported by the state Department of Education, which provides resources and support to Maine's schools as well as undertaking various regulatory duties as required by state and federal law. A recent study of the Department undertaken by the Council of Chief State School Officers, however, found that the agency lacked much of the capacity it needed to effectively support Maine's schools and school districts. The state's school and district leaders have echoed this finding, stating that they would like to see the Department become more effective in its support and assistance.

An opportunity for a full-scale review of the Department's work is coming in the form of Governor LePage's zero-based budget initiative, which will require state agencies to review all programs and practices in a search for efficiencies and improved levels of service. The Department should partner with stakeholders as part of this effort to review the work of the agency and provide suggestions for improvement.

The Department's staff is already at work reviewing internal operating procedures and practices, with the goal of improving efficiencies and customer service.

Goal: Maine's schools are supported by adequate and effective state resources.

Objective: Undertake an independent review of the state school funding system, continue ongoing collaboration with the state Department of Health and Human Services to ensure access to funding for needed health services, and continue ongoing work to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the state Department of Education in providing technical and other kinds of support.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Policy	Undertake an independent review of the state school funding system; propose potential policy changes, if any, to the next legislature.	Maine DOE, Maine Legislature	Complete report by January 1, 2013
Collaboration and Communication	Support the ongoing work of Maine DHHS to create a detailed manual on MaineCare and other health and wellness-related policy and programs.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with DHHS, stakeholders	Manual due September 1, 2012
Policy	Use zero-based budget initiative to further review and assess Maine DOE programs and processes; propose reforms in the next biennial budget bill	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders, Maine Legislature	Proposed reforms to be included in next biennial budget bill

Coordinated and Effective State Support

3. Comprehensive integration of technology

Since the deployment of the state's one-to-one computing initiative a decade ago, Maine has been a leader in the integration of technology and education. There remain, however, far greater opportunities to employ technology to improve learner outcomes.

As addressed elsewhere in this plan, online and distance learning options can provide students with additional opportunities to achieve and demonstrate proficiencies. Additionally, new computer-based assessment tools can provide educators with real-time information on student achievement, allowing teachers to adapt instructional practices to meet the needs of learners. New data tools, such as the State Longitudinal Data System, will be able to track learner growth over time, and as schools move to a proficiency-based system of schooling, advanced new student information systems will allow educators to track the achievement, by each student, of multiple learning outcomes.

Effective implementation of information technology can be a cost saver as well. Public education is a remarkably paperwork-intensive business and commonly used documents such as Individualized Education Plans, which could and should be created digitally, are too often drafted on paper even now. Significant cost savings could be realized if more modern data and information technology systems were put into place. This is especially true with regard to information and data systems at the state level, where effective implementation and integration of data systems has been an issue.

There are cultural changes that need to take place as well. As technology continues to transform modern life, schools, to remain relevant, must also use technology in transformative ways. Too often, educators and administrators have seen technology as an add-on or supplement, whose primary function was to support more traditional instructional and administrative practices. In the years to come, significant work must be done to more fully and comprehensively integrate technology into the everyday work of schools and districts—to take technology integration to the “next level.”

The first step in all this would be for the Department to undertake a detailed review of current data and technology initiatives and needs, both at the state and local level, with an eye toward developing an information technology “comprehensive plan.” Efforts must be made within the Department itself to better coordinate and integrate various technology projects. The Department should also work with IT directors in Maine schools to identify training and support needs.

Goal: Information and instructional technologies are supporting instructional practice and efficient school system operations.

Objective: Develop a “comprehensive plan” for technology integration, both in Maine’s schools and school districts and at the Maine DOE, developed in collaboration with IT personnel and educators across the state.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Planning and Implementation	Develop comprehensive inventory of ongoing technology and data projects and initiatives, with current status on each.	Maine DOE	June 1, 2012
Collaboration and Communication	Survey school unit IT directors and administrators regarding technology and data needs; use responses to develop detailed data and technology support plan.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders	September 1, 2012

Coordinated and Effective State Support**4. A robust and transparent accountability and improvement system**

Ensuring that education policies and programs at both the state and local levels are effective requires a robust, transparent accountability and improvement system that tracks the growth and achievement of every learner. The accountability system employed by the state today, designed to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act, has a number of flaws. It does not measure the growth and achievement of each learner individually, but establishes the success or failure of educators, schools and school districts by comparing this year's class of fourth graders, for instance, to last year's class. The system does not recognize that learners not only come to school in different places developmentally, but that they advance through their educational careers at different paces as well. Rather than using multiple measures of student achievement, the current system judges success or failure based on a single score on a single assessment at a single moment in time.

With the U.S. Department of Education expressing a willingness to allow states flexibility with regard to the accountability provisions of No Child Left Behind, Maine should undertake the effort to design and implement a comprehensive accountability structure focused on learner growth and achievement, one that uses multiple measures of learner proficiency tracked over time. Such a system should also fairly but readily identify underperforming schools, and ensure deployment of targeted and worthwhile assistance and support.

Goal: An effective school and district accountability and improvement system helps Maine's schools meet the needs of all learners.

Objective: As part of the federal NCLB waiver process, develop a rigorous and transparent state-based accountability and improvement system that makes use of multiple measures, tracks learner growth and achievement over time, publicly reports that achievement, and holds educators, schools and school systems to account.

Action Steps:

Strategy	Action Step	Responsible party	Deadline:
Planning and Implementation	Develop a plan for the design and implementation of a new state accountability system consistent with the principles of the NCLB flexibility package.	Maine DOE, in cooperation with stakeholders, Maine Legislature	Accountability task force to begin work spring of 2012; present recommendations to Governor and 126 th legislature in spring of 2013.