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S7E1: What is the state of K–12 education?

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The average school day today looks different than in years past. K–12 educators face a myriad of challenges this year, including teacher and other staffing shortages, distance learning, the politicization of curricula, calls for book bans and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the first episode of Season 7 of “The Maine Question,” we speak with Penny Bishop, dean of the University of Maine College of Education and Human Development; Jim Artesani, associate dean of graduate studies, research and outreach for the college; and Courtney Angelosante, coordinate of the Positive Behavior Supports & Interventions (PBIS) Initiative, to discuss the latest issues in the field of education, as well as opportunities for new and improved learning.

Transcript

[background music]

Jim Artesani: The fact is, even for kids who do have significant needs in schools, we know more about how to help them, support them, and teach them than we ever have before. To me, that’s really, really exciting.

Ron Lisnet: That’s Jim Artesani, associate dean in UMaine’s College of Education and Human Development, talking about heading back to school.

The first day of school, even if you haven’t been to school in more than 40 years like some of us, we can all remember that combination of fear, excitement, anticipation, and a thousand other emotions that the first day back can make you feel.

I’m Ron Lisnet, and this is “The Maine Question” podcast from the University of Maine.

[background music]

Ron: Thanks for joining us for the first episode of season seven of our show, as we take you back to school.

The education of our kids has always been a challenge, but these days seem to contain more challenges, conflicts, and opportunities than most other areas. The effects of COVID,

distance learning, anxiety and depression, politics in education, teacher and worker shortages, book banning. The list of issues facing schools, teachers, and administrators is as long as it is challenging.

One of the most pressing issues, as the school year began, was the severe shortage of teachers and other personnel. Many school districts in Maine were struggling to fill positions, to say nothing of other folks that make schools work, substitutes, bus drivers, food service workers.

At UMaine's College of Education and Human Development, these issues are well known and much work is being done to address them. We sat down for a round table discussion of the state of education in Maine and beyond with the dean of the college, Penny Bishop, and two of her colleagues.

Despite all of the challenges, there are exciting developments in the field of education.

In this episode, our "Maine Question," are you ready to go back to school? We kicked off our chat with some introductions and some memories of that first day of school.

Courtney Angelosante: My name's Courtney Angelosante, the coordinator of UMaine PBIS, which stands for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

For me, school was never anxiety-producing. I come from a family of educators. I've always loved school, and for me, what I loved most about those first days back was the social pieces. It was seeing my friends after the summer, seeing who was going to be in my classes, opportunities to make new connections. It was always an exciting time.

Penny Bishop: Hi, I'm Penny Bishop. I'm dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine.

For me, the start to school typically coincided with my birthday. I had some pretty exciting feelings about that time of year, but as I became a teacher, I will say that that's when the anxiety started to kick in.

That opportunity and challenge of creating a relationship and rapport with a new set of kids each year was both daunting and rewarding.

Ron: Two sides of a coin, excitement and anxiety, right?

Penny: Absolutely.

Ron: Jim, how about you?

Jim: I'm Jim Artesani, and I'm Associate Dean for graduate studies and research here at the University of Maine. As a child, the first day of school was always a little bit frustrating because to me, it marked the end of summer and the freedom to hang out with my friends.

As I get older, I think, particularly in high school, it was exciting to think about getting back into the swing of things and engaging in the kinds of activities that I enjoyed doing in high school.

In a university setting, and even when I was teaching in public school, I always look forward to it. I begin to rev up as we get into August, and I find it stimulating to think about and get ready for the start of school year.

Ron: It's different than when you were in high school, you're still in education so there's still that dynamic, right?

Jim: Yes.

Ron: As we dive into this, let's try to get a big-picture view of what is the state of education. What are some of the hot-button issues teachers are dealing with in the classroom, and you in the college you're trying to get your arms around?

Penny, let's maybe start with you.

Penny: I think one of the biggest things that people probably have noticed from any media source lately is this human capital shortage, if you will. That we are really working hard to increase and diversify the teacher workforce and the educational leader workforce as well.

You'll note that there are plenty of schools in Maine and beyond that are opening without full staffs this year, so there's a real challenge in that regard.

Then, we're seeing increased political divisiveness. Certainly, schools, school boards, teachers are facing greater challenges to curriculum, to policies, to practices, and that doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon. Those are things that we're focusing on.

Ron: For anybody that can jump in here, one of the major colleges in the state that is training teachers, what can you do as an Institute of higher education to help in that regard?

Penny: One of the things we're working on in terms of increasing and diversifying the workforce is to open up flexible pathways to teaching. Increasingly, we are partnering with a lot of school districts to create teacher residencies.

We are creating grow-your-own options where we're working closely with principals to identify folks who are in their communities, maybe already working in their schools, who are interested in moving into teaching positions and supporting them in that way.

We are also working in partnership with Maine Indian Education to identify different pathways to teaching for more Wabanaki teachers, as well as to educate non-Wabanaki educators around Wabanaki studies and other ways to be culturally responsive in the classroom.

Ron: For everyone here, a recent article in the paper said that in the year 2021, more than 2,000 teachers retired or left their jobs in the state of Maine.

What are some of the factors that lead to that number, Jim?

Jim: As Penny mentioned, the politicalization of education to some extent, particularly over the last five years or so. There are a lot of people who are taking shots at education. Because we all went to school, it's easy for us to think that we know how schools operate even though we may not have gone to school 40 or 50 years ago or even 10 years ago.

Schools have changed so rapidly. What schools do now with kids is so far beyond what it was, certainly for my self as a youngster going to school.

Ron: Courtney, any thoughts from you?

Courtney: I worked with a school counselor last year, someone I respect a lot and I worked with across the years. She told me she was leaving because she couldn't cope with the sadness, just an overwhelming need based on COVID-19 and the instability it's caused in our communities which we experienced and felt in our schools. Now, we have educators trying to respond to those needs.

Sometimes, it was a lack of resources or without any access to resources because of the remote nature of how we experienced the educational platform last year and the year before. Services weren't happening, have not been happening. We've had kindergarteners coming in to school with significant developmental needs gone without any pre-K or early intervention services.

I don't know if in our history we've experienced that, but that's being felt in our schools. We're being asked to do more without resources. In some cases, teachers are faced with either not being able to meet the needs of students or not having students come to school because the workforce capacity is so stretched.

These aren't circumstances under which teachers are feeling rewarded, that they're feeling efficacious. They're not tapping into why they got into education in the first place. They're just in survival. Their bandwidth is stretched to capacity.

Ron: Furthering that point, how close might this year be to a normal school year? Are we never going back?

Courtney: That's a good question. I'm not sure. Right now, in my past month, I've been working with a lot of schools, over 30 directly. There's a positive buzz. Teachers, students are excited to get back into the classroom. They're excited to have some of the COVID restrictions relaxed. That new school year buzz is about us.

I'm not sure how long that will last. I think that we're going to experience some of the stretching with the significant workforce shortage again. We've students who need help.

How are we going to provide for their needs if we can't fill those positions and fill them with professionals who are equipped to do it, to do the job well?

Ron: Penny, what was learned from the pandemic that might be kept? Are there any positive or negative impacts of distance learning perhaps that the pandemic forced upon us that might be used going forward?

Penny: I've heard a number of things come anecdotally. I also conducted some research during the remote emergency teaching switch. Right as schools moved to that first spring of COVID, I did some research with about 350 educators asking them that question. Reflecting back on that moment, what actually might have improved?

One of the things that came forward that surprised me was family involvement, that families were more engaged because kids were at home. That's when the schooling and where the schooling was happening. There were a lot of interesting insights into that piece.

I would say also that educators were somewhat forced to streamline what they were teaching and forced to identify what matters in a different way.

Knowing that they needed to identify the critical concepts, the critical skills, and strip it down to the core of what the essence is that they want students to come away, knowing being able to do.

That was another thing that educators themselves identified. Of course, technology skills also skyrocketed, but those two pieces I thought were pretty interesting and unexpected.

Ron: Jim, you mentioned earlier some of the hot-button issues, and some of the controversies that schools and teachers are dealing with.

Whether it's race, or inclusivity, or violence in schools, these are creating divisions in our society. We're seeing that at school board meetings, or conflicts with parents.

How do we try to navigate through those contentious issues?

Jim: The expectation is that schools will meet the needs of all students. Earlier, I mentioned that schools do more for kids now than they've ever done even as resources have been depleted.

The expectation is that schools will provide educational services, and other supports that students need to grow into healthy, productive adults. Schools are educating a more diverse student body in a time where there's a lot of polarization in our country and around the world.

Courtney: One of the nice things that came out of remote, and then moving to hybrid and returning is a focus on wellness.

This picture of a student as being more than an academic body, that there's a whole child in front of us. Thinking about checking in with them to support their self-monitoring of their emotions, self-regulation, self-advocacy when they found themselves struggling, and normalizing asking for help.

I heard that certainly in my children's classrooms. I heard that in the schools that I've been supporting is it's OK not to be OK. It's OK to ask for help. I think that those are themes that we'll see continue, and I hope are here to stay. We know that the mental health toll on our society as a collective increased during COVID.

In another area, too, that I'm thinking about as we've built up our knowledge and our fluency with technologies, there are some students that did better learning remotely. That they felt more comfortable accessing the content, engaging with the material and their teacher in that platform.

For a certain percentage of our youth that have been at risk, that might have some school refusal, we might have developed an access point for them that might not ever disappear. That we can continue to teach and engage even remotely.

Penny: May I jump in on that?

Ron: Please.

Penny: I do wonder the extent to which some of that results from teachers increasingly personalizing education.

That is another piece that I saw happen more was this awareness that not all students are benefiting from the same approach, which we know, over time, has always been the case.

The opportunity for that delivery to happen in a variety of ways based on students' needs and interests and abilities seems to have increased. I feel like teachers did a lot more personalizing during that time. I'm hopeful that that would continue as well.

Ron: Penny, what are some of the trends in terms of young people choosing to become a teacher? What here in the college are you doing to make it more attractive, and more of an option?

Penny: Certainly, the trend is downward, unfortunately, and perhaps not surprisingly, that fewer and fewer people are choosing to become teachers.

Before the pandemic, nationally, we saw teacher education enrollment decline by 30 percent in 10 years. We know that during the pandemic, that continued to go downward.

We are at a challenging time in teacher education, and thinking about how we continue to staff our schools with quality professionals. It is a conundrum, but we do know a few things.

I mentioned before the idea of a grow-your-own program. That, we do know, is particularly effective for rural and isolated communities. That identifying folks who are already in communities, and encouraging them to become educators is a good way to ensure that we retain the teachers that we have, or recruit teachers who will stay in those communities.

That's one strategy that we're using. Another is this idea of the teacher residency. Education is one of the few professions where you do not have a paid internship. In fact, you have to take, perhaps, time away from a job in order to do what is called one-student teaching.

That places a lot of people at a disadvantage, and it makes it inequitable and inaccessible for many. We are partnering with districts to make sure that our students who are pre-service teachers can become teachers while having paid internships, which does change things dramatically. That makes it more accessible as well.

Then, another way in which we're doing that is to increase the accessibility and flexibility of our programming, so that people have more ways to access it. Also, trying to make it a more affordable option in terms of increasing our scholarships, and other ways in which there's loan forgiveness for folks like that.

There are a number of policy levers we can also use, but it's going to be a multi-pronged approach.

Ron: Let's talk about some of the latest new initiatives in education.

Jim, what is SEL? Why is that important to educators?

Jim: Sure. As Courtney mentioned earlier, we often view education from the standpoint of the academic perspective. The reality is children are growing. All aspects of the child is growing and developing. All of those different areas that they're growing in require support like we would provide academic support and instruction.

Students also need to have support and instruction around what we refer to as social-emotional learning. Which is it's helping students to learn the skills that they need to be successful at that particular time in school and out of school, out in their social environments. Then, continue to develop those skills over time.

Oftentimes, we think that social-emotional learning is something new to schools. It may not have had that particular label, but it's something that is unavoidable.

It's not accurate to say that we never used to do that in schools. There's no way you could do school and not be doing that. Maybe you could be doing it poorly, but it's always been happening. Now, we're more careful. We're more intentional in terms of how we go about doing that.

Ron: We love our acronyms in academia, so let's try another one.

Courtney, what is PBIS? What is happening with that here at UMaine?

Courtney: PBIS stands for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. It's an implementation framework. It's multi-tiered. It's from maximizing the selection of those evidence-based practices that we adopt and implement in schools.

We know a lot about what works with youth at risk, about how to build systems that are responsive and equitable. PBIS is that framework, or that implementation blueprint, so that those ideas become a lived experience in schools. It's a framework. It's a continuum of supports that promote academic, social, emotional, and behavioral competence of every student that attends.

It's important to know that PBIS is been around for a while and it has growing research, making it one of the longest-running technical assistance centers in our country.

It's linked to reductions in discipline, increases in emotional regulation, decreases in aggressive behavior, improved academic engagement and achievement, perceptions of organizational health and safety improve when schools implement, increased perceptions of school climate, and reductions in teacher turnover.

All things that are in those hot topics that we're talking about, this is a framework to help our schools get there.

In Maine, it's growing, so the Maine Department of Education was awarded a State Personnel Development Grant. We refer to it as the SPDG, and it identified PBIS as one of the top priorities. As a result, I entered into a cooperative agreement between the University of Maine and the department to coordinate the effort.

I work in a leadership team, and we're scaling the number of schools in a cohort model. Our cohort model is running its second year right now. Schools join, and they partner with 17 to 18 other schools. They're in that cohort for three years to build their Tier 1 system.

Currently, we have two cohorts running, so we're supporting about 35 schools in that Tier 1 process. We also have schools in an advanced tier process because they have reached fidelity at the Tier 1 level. Now, they're building their systems to support youth that are showing some sign of risk that we want to respond to in a timely way.

I will also say that we have launched our first training of trainers for Maine PBIS using the micro-credential system at the University of Maine. This credentialing process will take our candidates about 18 months to complete. It includes coursework, applied practice, indirect application in schools. That's new. It just started last month.

Last, we have our University of Maine Graduate Certificate Program for RTI for Behavior, which is our multi-tiered PBIS framework. There's significant overlap in dovetailing with all of these things. What I see is we draw into the University of Maine a number of student to our grad certificate program because of our work in our cohorts, and vice versa.

I have students in this certificate program that recruit their schools to join the cohorts. It's a nice way that we're supporting Maine in our college.

Ron: Penny, maybe a couple of questions about the college. It's about more than just training K-12 teachers. You have other programs. You have other disciplines, almost.

Maybe you could talk about some of those, what you're growing. Where are you headed with all this?

Penny: Sure. Thanks for that question. We are. We are a College of Education and Human Development. That's really important because it enables us to work across some of those disciplinary boundaries.

We have three schools, each of which has teacher education in it, but it is far from the only thing that we do. In addition to preparing educational teachers and leaders, we are also providing service to the state in terms of human development, child development, and family studies.

We are also strengthening the physical side, as well as the mental side with our athletic training, our kinesiology, and exercise science. We have a very deep team in our special education program. We really are doing things that cut across a lot of different areas.

One of our newest programs, which is really exciting, is our outdoor leadership program. It's a way to provide both educators and informal educators with the skills, dispositions, and conservation ethic to go out into outdoor spaces, and leave people safely and with inspiration. We're seeing some growth there. That's really exciting as well.

We are a college that is about 50 percent undergraduate and 50 percent graduate, so a lot of what we do is at the masters and doctoral level. We do provide the highest enrollment in most teacher candidates in the state. We are a big provider in that way, which is a terrific opportunity for us to serve the state and to influence it in pretty powerful ways.

Ron: Let's talk about the grad program there. Does the college provide a substantial number of administrators, policymakers for education in Maine, and what influence does it have on education in the state big picture?

Penny: Yeah, we absolutely do. We have a terrific educational leadership program. We do define leadership in a broad way. At the same time, a lot of administrators either go into and/or come out of that program as a result.

In fact, that program had been admitting folks on a biennial basis, so we were only able to accept cohorts every other year. We're really, really excited about the fact that as of this year, we're moving to an annual admission cycle. We're very hopeful that we'll be able to increase the support for the state at the leader and policy level well.

I would add to that our higher education program does something similar at the higher ed level. We prepare leaders and folks who are in student affairs in institutions across the state and well beyond.

We're preparing presidents of community colleges. We're providing division directors at human service agencies. We are in many ways the backbone of the state for a lot of social services and education services.

Ron: Maybe this is a question for all of you. Technology obviously is a big part of all of our lives.

Is it playing an increasing role in education? What are some tech trends and innovations that we're likely to see come on board here in the coming years?

Jim: Really, you would ask about the pandemic and the move to different instructional formats. That's something that we've embraced particularly at the graduate level. Many of our programs now are completely online. The others are doing some hybrid instruction.

That's had a significant impact in the state in the sense that working professionals don't have to drive to campus to complete their graduate degree. They can get advanced training through online instruction.

With technologies, like Zoom for example, you can have face-to-face real-time instruction. Everybody can be gathered and see everybody.

Technology in some ways, I know for a fact that the pandemic pushed us in that direction. Maybe there's some programs that were a little skeptical about whether that was the way go and found out because we had to. We had to jump into that with both feet. A number of programs have become fully online as a result of that experience.

Ron: Are there other tech trends? Anything coming down the pipe that are either daunting or exciting?

Courtney: In terms of technology, what I see that's promising or exciting is access. We're seeing families a bit more engaged because they can attend from anywhere. They can attend from work if they're a parent that's working during the day, so increased attendance at things like IEP meetings or virtual parent nights for parents who have kids at home.

I'm seeing technology use increase access in more equitable ways than maybe our traditional methods of engaging families. It's pretty much what I'm most excited about.

Ron: Is that important in a rural state where travel distances might be a challenge?

Courtney: A lot of problem solving has happened in how do we get access to our families that may not have had access. I can't say we're there. I don't think that we are, but I think we've made significant progress in that area.

Ron: Penny, anything else you'd point to that's coming down the pipe?

Penny: I'd love to just mention that I think AI and VR are both pieces that are exploding in education. Augmented reality and virtual reality, we've seen in the past 10 years, I'd say, a huge amount of growth. We'll continue to see that.

One great example of that, that we have here in the college, is the work of Justin Dimmel in his IMRE. I know we love acronyms. His IMRE Lab, Immersive Mathematics in Rendered Environments Lab, it's a great example of the way in which technology can completely change how we think about teaching and learning.

Ron: YouTube and Google are tools of the trade now, right?

Penny: Absolutely. They are.

Ron: We've talked about a lot of challenges, some controversies, and things. What excites you? You can't think of a profession where you can affect youth and the future more than being a teacher. Anybody that goes into has to love that.

What excites you as we think about where education is headed, for all of you?

Penny: One of the things that I like to say is that our college is all about strengthening individuals, communities, families, and schools. As I think about education in general, it's the strengthening that we do as a profession that excites me and opportunity to lift up not just individuals, but whole communities.

That's the kind of collective work we need to be doing as a state. That's what excites me about being in this work. I'm incredibly optimistic about what lies ahead.

Ron: Courtney, how about you? What do you think?

Courtney: I think that we are moving into an era that does recognize the whole child, the whole person. It takes into consideration the mental health and well-being, not just the academic piece. We know that's important. It's always been important. It's not any less important, but now it's more balanced.

In the same way, we're seeing that the well-being, the efficacy of teachers in schools matters. We want to recruit teachers and have them want to stay, which means we have to examine all kinds of variables that lead to that. I think we're looking at that. We have to look at that, and with that challenge is an opportunity to do it a little bit better going forward.

I also think that we're also with this social injustice that we were experiencing is calling on schools to create equitable systems, representative of a wide variety of stakeholders. We're seeing some inroads there too, about what that looks like, how to do it better, and to make sure that the systems that we create are co-created with the stakeholders that they're for.

I think we're making progress there.

Ron: Jim, do you have thoughts?

Jim: Yeah. Just going off of what penny and Courtney was just saying, it is about strengthening. The work that we do in our college is about strengthening schools and communities. We're out of time when our knowledge about how to do what we do is growing exponentially as it is in other fields as well, maybe not as recognized as much.

Again, I think most of the general public tends to think about school in terms of their own experiences in school. Schools do more for kids now than they've ever done. There's a need for schools to do more, but we're also better equipped to do that.

Earlier, we talked about teachers leaving the profession in high turnover rates and things like that. One of the areas that's often pointed to on why are teachers leaving the field...

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Jim: ...the folks will say kids are more challenging than they used to be, and that's a little bit hard to quantify.

The fact is even for kids who do have significant needs in schools, we know more about how to help them, support them, and teach them than we ever have before. To me, that's really, really exciting.

Ron: Well, if I had three apples, I would give you all apples right now. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us.

Courtney: Thanks for the opportunity.

Penny: Thanks for the opportunity.

Jim: Yes, thank you.

Ron: Thanks for joining us. We're lining up some great stories for you this fall. We hope you come back around and check them out.

All of our episodes are available in the places you get your podcast from, typically Apple, Google, Spotify, Stitcher, and SoundCloud.

They also appear on UMaine's Facebook and YouTube pages. Any questions or comments, send them along to mainequestion@maine.edu.

This is Ron Lisnet. We'll catch you next time on The Maine Question.

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The University of Maine in Orono is the flagship campus of the University of Maine System, where efforts toward racial equity are ongoing, as is the commitment to facing a complicated and not always just institutional history. The University recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of the Penobscot nation, where issues of water and its territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot

homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations — the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac — through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The university also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.