

## Maine ESOL Meeting Opening Remarks

Good morning! It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the 2021 Maine ESOL Meeting. My name is April Perkins, and I am the World Languages, English for Speakers of Other Languages, and Bilingual Programs Specialist at the Maine Department of Education.

I am happy to say that about 150 educators and community partners are participating in today's event. During a year like this one has been, I personally appreciate the very precious time that you have all chosen to spend with us here today as we come together to focus on our state's remarkable students who are English learners.

I would like to thank our three wonderful speakers this morning, Elena Sullivan, Deqa Dhalac, and Dr. Laurene Christensen. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to all of our fantastic presenters who will be offering sessions this afternoon. This event is only possible because of your work and willingness to share your knowledge, so thank you very much! Thanks also to my Department colleagues who have assisted with the logistics of the day.

As we kick off this exciting day of speakers and presentations, I would like to share a few important pieces of information with you, as well as some reflections on the past year in ESOL education in Maine.

First, in order to minimize background noise and feedback, if you could please ensure that your microphone remains muted except when it is your turn to speak, that would be most appreciated. You are welcome to have your camera on or off, according to your personal preference. Throughout the day, you are welcome to share questions for our speakers and presenters in the chat or unmute during any open question and answer times.

All of today's sessions will be recorded and shared on the Maine DOE YouTube channel next week. If you would like access to a presenter's slides, please contact the presenter directly. The exception to this will be for our keynote and the two afternoon sessions presented by Maine DOE ESOL Consultants Robin Fleck and

Maureen Fox, whose slides will be posted to the Maine DOE website under English learner resources.

If you would like to receive contact hours certificates for the sessions you attend, you will need to complete a presentation evaluation for each individual session by Tuesday May 11<sup>th</sup>. Contact hours certificates will be emailed to you within two weeks. A link to each presentation evaluation can be found in the schedule, under each presentation title. For the morning speakers and keynote, please find links to the contact hours request forms in the chat.

With those details out of the way, I would like to share some reflections with you. It is very fitting that today falls during teacher appreciation week. This year, perhaps more than ever, educators have poured their hearts and souls into ensuring that the needs of their students and their families are met. I truly feel that ESOL educators are among the most compassionate and giving people on the face of this earth, and the lengths to which they have gone since the onset of the pandemic are conclusive proof of that.

Home visits, after-hours calls, delivering meals, endless hours of behind-the-scenes work to transition to remote learning, and advocating for students and their families at every turn - ESOL educators are relentless. And in case you don't hear it often enough, thank you. Your work matters. The lives of your students and their families, and in turn whole communities, are forever changed by your efforts.

The past year has been one of unspeakable loss, which we must acknowledge has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable among us, including many of our students and their families. Disparities that have long disadvantaged students who are English learners have been amplified and brought to light as never before. As society at large and education in particular train their focus on racial equity and social justice with intensified zeal, an enormous opportunity now exists to effect true and lasting change.

This is a time when many systems and traditions we thought were permanent have been shaken up and re-envisioned. While the three actions I'm about to

propose may seem naively optimistic, I invite you to join me in the kind of naïve optimism that has always been the source of reinvention.

- First, challenge systems that place the responsibility for meeting all the needs of ELs and their families on the shoulders of ESOL educators. This model isn't sustainable for educators, and it isn't in the best interest of students. For educators and students to thrive, it's imperative that all educators recognize and fulfill their shared responsibility. Teachers can take steps to promote this mindset shift, but it is administrators who wield the most authority to change systems. A powerful tool in this is the new WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, which underlines every educator's role in helping English learners acquire English and academic content simultaneously. Administrators must express a clear expectation that all teachers will implement the WIDA ELD Standards in tandem with the Maine Learning Results. Collaborative planning time is necessary and must be prioritized in scheduling.
- Next, if your district does not yet have a diversity, equity, and inclusion team or committee, it's the perfect time to establish one. If one already exists, be a part of it, as you are essential and powerful advocates for students who are English learners. The issues cannot be addressed until they are known and understood, so a team such as this can assist in conducting a needs assessment, and then in improving policies and procedures and organizing professional learning opportunities. I'm proud to say that starting last summer four of my DOE colleagues and I have been leading the diversity, equity, and inclusion work within the Department, and I'm hopeful that the effects of that work will be apparent to you as educators in the field as we transform our organizational culture and practices.
- Finally, it's time for the state of Maine to embrace bilingual education. With the vast body of research that exists, we know conclusively that there is no better way to ensure the academic success and social-emotional well-being of students than to support the development of their primary languages alongside English. An English-only model not only disadvantages students

academically, but it also sends negative messages about the value of other languages and cultures. If implementing a full bilingual program feels unattainable at this time, consider what smaller steps may be feasible right now. For example, encouraging families to continue the use of their home language, training parents on how to maintain bilingualism in an English-speaking environment, providing bilingual materials to be used at home, and implementing translanguaging practices.

Please know that I am always happy to serve as a thought-partner and resource to you as you seek to implement the best, most effective programs for your students who are English learners. For additional support and networking with colleagues from across the state, I also encourage you to consider joining Maine's professional organization for language educators, FLAME. The Foreign Language Association of Maine is undergoing significant updates, including a name change and rebranding, to more accurately express its mission to support ALL languages.