

Creating Conditions to Support Innovation: Lessons Learned from RREV

In today's rapidly changing educational landscape, innovation is not just desirable—it's essential. The Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) initiative in Maine has demonstrated that creating an environment where innovation can flourish requires a systematic approach to transforming our educational systems. This brief distills key insights from RREV about cultivating innovation in diverse educational contexts.

We've identified five key strategies that create fertile ground for educational innovation: engaged leadership, a culture of risk-taking, enabling policies, comprehensive educator support, and deep community engagement. Through real-world examples from Maine schools, we'll illustrate how these principles have been implemented in practice. These strategies ensure that innovation is not only possible but sustainable, leading to improved educational outcomes.

Engage Leadership for Sustainable Innovation

Strong leadership is essential for the success of educational innovation. Effective leaders do more than simply grant permission; they actively remove barriers, facilitate collaboration among various stakeholders, and ensure alignment between innovative practices and broader school goals. The active involvement of leaders is critical from the design stage through implementation. This often involves securing long-term support from school boards and local authorities, as well as fostering a culture that encourages experimentation and risk-taking. By actively participating in the innovation process, leaders can provide the necessary resources, guidance, and support to make meaningful change possible.

RREV projects benefited from the requirement that project teams include both administrators and teachers, ensuring that multiple perspectives were incorporated into planning and execution. A prime example of this engaged leadership comes from [Marshwood](#) Great Works School, where two teachers and the principal collaboratively wrote the pilot project. The principal's belief in the project's vision led to proactive support measures. Recognizing the demands of implementing the pilot while maintaining regular teaching duties, the principal brought in additional staff to support the two lead teachers. This allowed the teachers to dedicate the necessary time and energy to carry the pilot's vision forward without compromising their primary responsibilities. This hands-on involvement from leadership not only facilitated the project's implementation but also demonstrated a commitment to innovation that could inspire broader cultural change within the school.

Foster a Culture of Innovation and Risk-Taking

Innovation thrives when educators and students have the autonomy to explore new approaches without fear of failure. Schools that embrace a culture of "engaged autonomy" provide the freedom to experiment while offering necessary support. This environment fosters creativity, encourages risk-taking, and ultimately leads to meaningful change.

At Bath Middle School, a redesigned schedule was instrumental in creating a culture shift that supported innovation. This new structure provided teachers with more time to collaborate with instructional coaches and each other, leading to richer experiences for students. It also allowed for "passion classes" on Friday afternoons, replacing underutilized study halls and strengthening student-teacher connections. By challenging assumptions about factors like sports and study periods, the school reimagined its schedule to better align with goals of student engagement, connection, and achievement. This intentional allocation of time within the school day prioritized innovation and collaboration, demonstrating how structural changes can drive cultural transformation.

Additionally, through the RREV initiative, Maine Department of Education (DOE) shifted its focus from accountability to supporting the innovation process. By concentrating on problem-solving and continuous improvement rather than on immediate test score results, Maine DOE allowed schools the time needed to experiment and refine their approaches. This long-term perspective on improvement created a safer and more supportive environment for experimentation.

Establish Policies that Facilitate Experimentation

Policies that reduce structural barriers are crucial for enabling schools to innovate. Since 1991, Maine has had legislation that supports the state's commitment to fostering innovation. This legislation was revised and strengthened in 2021. The "Public School Innovation" statute (MRS Title 20-A §8) provides flexibility by allowing schools to request waivers from specific rules if these rules hinder their innovation goals. The law also recognizes that effective innovation is most successfully carried out at the local level, depending on involvement from educators, community members, and students. It encourages schools to understand the root causes of challenges they face and to innovate and test solutions to those challenges using a continuous improvement process. By focusing on continuous improvement, the law aims to create a culture of innovation in Maine's public schools, where adaptation and enhancement of educational practices become an integral part of how schools operate rather than exceptional events.

A clear example of how policy enablers can drive innovation comes from Mount Blue High School. This school was able to push beyond traditional learning structures by implementing extended learning opportunities that included outdoor education. Students participated in activities like canoe trips, which required changes to scheduling, transportation logistics, and the acquisition of necessary equipment. By reducing these structural barriers, the school created a dynamic learning environment that connected students to real-world experiences and encouraged hands-on learning.



Provide Comprehensive Support for Educators

Supporting educators throughout the innovation process is key to the success of any educational initiative. RREV teams benefited from the structured support Maine DOE provided, which began by helping teams identify and address the root causes of key educational challenges. One of the central tools in this problem-solving process was the [logic model](#), which documented a project's theory of change and acted as a guiding framework to keep teams focused on their main objectives. Over time, the logic model served as a "true north" for RREV teams, ensuring that projects stayed on track and that activities remained aligned with their core goals.

Another critical component of educator support was the innovation [coaching framework](#). Maine DOE provided external coaches to support RREV teams throughout the innovation process. Coaches supported RREV teams to plan their innovations, incorporate learning and evidence-based and promising practices, engage and communicate with stakeholders, develop measures for determining progress, analyze and reflect on programmatic data, make adjustments in response to emerging needs, and plan for sustainability. The innovation coaching framework guided innovation coaches to select high leverage areas of focus in their collaboration with schools. Schools consistently valued the role of these coaches, who helped them stay focused on their objectives and navigate challenges.

Tailor Innovations to Community Needs and Assets

Community engagement is essential for the success and sustainability of educational innovation. RREV projects were locally driven, allowing schools to design initiatives that met the specific needs of their communities. This localized focus created a sense of ownership among educators, students, and community members, making the innovations more likely to endure.

Leveraging the benefits of a school's physical environment can support more engaging and relevant learning experiences. Camden-Rockport Elementary School provides an excellent

example of this approach. Previously, the school had blocked off access to a riverbank at the edge of their property due to safety concerns. However, recognizing the educational potential of this natural resource, they took steps to make it safe and accessible for students. By expanding this area for learning, the school transformed what was once considered a hazard into a valuable outdoor classroom. This initiative not only enhanced the students' learning environment but also deepened their connection to their local ecosystem.



Extending this concept further, schools can create meaningful connections to local industries and future careers by utilizing their unique geographical and economic contexts. Jonesport-Beals High School exemplifies this strategy by leveraging its coastal environment to help students explore fields such as aquaculture, aquaponics, and hydroponics. These areas of study are not just academic exercises but potential career paths in the region. By aligning educational innovations with local economic opportunities, Jonesport School is preparing students for future careers while simultaneously strengthening the connection between education and community needs. This approach highlights the importance of tailoring educational innovation to local contexts, ensuring relevance and creating pathways for students to engage with and potentially contribute to their community's economic future.



Looking Ahead: Promote Collaboration and Continuous Improvement

As RREV enters its next phase, there will be a new focus on fostering collaboration among educators to share and spread learning. Maine DOE is organizing site visits and inviting educators from nearby districts to participate, allowing them to learn from each other's successes. This regional approach helps reduce the burden of travel and provides opportunities for schools to tap into expertise across the state. Maine DOE sees these site visits as valuable professional learning opportunities, further strengthening the support network for educators.

In addition to promoting collaboration, Maine DOE continues to explore ways to provide training and structured support for educators engaged in the innovation process. By focusing on long-term improvements and reducing structural barriers, the state is creating an environment where educational innovation can thrive. This sustained support ensures that schools have the tools, time, and autonomy to create dynamic, student-centered learning environments that prepare students for the future.