

# The Value of Multiple Pathways: Rationale and Results

Key findings from ICF's external evaluation



## Background

This document summarizes key findings from ICF's external evaluation of the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program. RREV is funded by a \$16.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K–12 Education Models program and is intended to promote innovation in Maine schools so that all students across the state have access to high-quality and responsive learning opportunities. Since August 2021, over 40 school districts throughout Maine have been awarded federal funding from RREV to support the implementation of innovative education pilot projects, including nine Multiple Pathways programs.

## About Multiple Pathways

Multiple Pathways programs offer students more options and routes to complete their high school education and pursue career goals, especially in ways that align with specific industries in high demand. Participating students have access to rigorous academics, career technical education, work- and project-based learning, and supportive services.

## Why Multiple Pathways Opportunities Are Important and Innovative

ICF's evaluation identified several reasons why Multiple Pathways programs are innovative:

"Students were excited to come to school and participate. Kids had tremendous growth in social areas, working with people they never would before as well as actually participating and talking in class."

– Teacher

- 1 Customization and Personalization** – Multiple Pathways programs give students agency and responsibility over their learning by allowing them to tailor their educational and career journeys to their specific interests, strengths, and goals. This customization can result in more engaged and motivated learners. Regional school unit (RSU) 21 (Kennebunk's) Alternative Education pilot is unique in that the implementation team invests a great deal of time at the *beginning of each school year* developing a brand-new curriculum that is responsive to the needs of that particular student cohort. Wayfinder Schools' pilot program centers each student's lived experience and offers individualized instruction to each student, such that the instructor also fills the role as a caring and trusted mentor in students' lives.
- 2 Diverse Learning Experiences** – Multiple Pathways programs offer a variety of learning experiences, such as internships, apprenticeships, work-study arrangements, project-based learning, outdoor learning, and traditional classroom instruction. This diversity can help students develop a well-rounded skill set. For example, at Lee Academy, students participate in a series of service-learning-based outdoor projects—such as trail work and community gardening—that occur both at school and with local nonprofit organizations. Students at Falmouth engage in a variety of experiential learning activities connected to the Presumpscot Watershed, including water testing and identification of local flora and fauna. Each student engages in an experiential learning project connected to local waterways, including fishing, canoeing, and navigating underwater robots. Maine Indian Education engages students in immersive outdoor project-based experiences designed to connect students with cultural identity and real-world learning.
- 3 Real-World Relevance** – By incorporating real-world experiences and practical skills training, Multiple Pathways programs bridge the gap between education and the job market. This can enhance graduates' employability and preparedness for the workforce. For example, RSU 84 (East Grand's) business pathway

helps connect what is learned in the classroom about business topics—such as business management and financial literacy—to gaining applied experience in trades and product development in the community.

**4 Inclusivity** – Multiple Pathways programs aim to be inclusive and accessible to a broader range of individuals, including those from underrepresented backgrounds or with diverse learning styles and needs. For example, the implementation team at RSU 21 (Kennebunk) recognized that students coming into the Alternative Education program had certain social-emotional needs (as well as histories of adverse childhood experiences and trauma) that were not properly addressed in mainstream education settings; hence, the explicit focus on social-emotional learning and wellness.

**5 Collaboration and Partnerships** – These programs often involve collaborations between educational institutions, employers, and community organizations, fostering a more cohesive and holistic approach to education and workforce development. Many pilots created workforce exposure opportunities for students. For example, both Wayfinder Schools and Maine School Administrative District (MSAD) 49 (Lawrence) connect students to local career technical education, financial literacy education, and internship/apprenticeship opportunities.

**6 Industry Alignment** – These programs are frequently designed in close consultation with industry experts, ensuring that curriculum and training are aligned with the current and future needs of the job market. For example, St. George Public Schools' Makerspace Initiative convened a working group of 20-plus community stakeholders, including local contractors and small business owners, to inform the development of career and technical education programming, particularly the emphasis on helping students develop employable skills that are in demand locally. The St. George program also offers students opportunities to engage with career and technical education in early grades (PK–8), and thus explore their interests and identify their passions before beginning high school.



*Students from RSU 21 (Kennebunk) worked on a house for the Multiple Pathways pilot.*

**7 Economic Revitalization and Social Development** – Multiple Pathways programs can have broader economic benefits for communities by building a local workforce. For example, at St. George Public Schools, each class visits (or is visited by) a local business or contractor working in the trades or technical fields. “I found one of our excursions, in which we stopped at various locations between Sebago Lake and our school, to be a grounding experience in which I was ... truly happy for the first time in a long time. I found myself completely focused and not worrying about other things going on in my life,” one student said.

## Results

Here are some outcomes ICF has found at RREV schools implementing Multiple Pathways pilots:

**1 Increased Educational Attainment** – Multiple Pathways programs have helped individuals improve attendance and achieve higher levels of education, such as completing a high school diploma, obtaining a GED, or earning a postsecondary degree or certificate. For example, at Lee Academy, many students in the Outdoor Leadership program graduated at the end of the 2022–2023 school year. Students in the Experience Creates Excellent Leaders (ExCEL) program, which was designed specifically for students who struggle in traditional classroom settings, have increased enrollment in postsecondary training, such as applying to local community colleges.

**2 Increased Mental and Emotional Wellness** – Students experience enhanced social-emotional well-being, including greater levels of happiness, self-confidence, and self-esteem, as they achieve educational and career goals. Overall, 60% of students “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that participating in the Multiple Pathways pilot this year helped them be a happier person. Additionally, 78% of parents reported that participating in the Multiple Pathways pilot improved their child’s mental and emotional well-being, including all parents from RSU 84 (East Grand), MSAD 49 (Lawrence), and Lee Academy.

**3 Personal Fulfillment** – Many students reported greater personal fulfillment and a sense of accomplishment through Multiple Pathways programs as they reach their educational and career goals. For example, students in the alternative education program at RSU 21 (Kennebunk) are currently working with each other to renovate a house at a local land trust. Students described how this teamwork helps them learn and that they feel a sense of accomplishment when “we’re all collectively working on one thing.” According to one parent, the alternative education system has also fostered a “sense of belonging” for their student because it helped their child recognize their “own giftedness” beyond traditional academics, athletics, or the arts. They also said the Alternative Education Pathway takes students’ ideas and “expands them” so that they can recognize that they actually have good, valuable ideas that they can develop on their own.

**4 Reduced Barriers** – Multiple Pathways programs helped remove or reduce barriers that traditionally hinder student success in mainstream academic settings, such as financial constraints, lack of transportation, or family needs. For example, the MSAD 49 Lawrence Education Alternative Program (L.E.A.P.) program offers a comprehensive wraparound approach to ensuring each student’s academic success. Specifically, the program ensures that each student has time to shower in the morning, and a change of clothes are made available to students (if needed). Teachers also make sure that each student has had breakfast each morning.



*A representative from Maine Audubon teaching Falmouth students about birds local to Maine.*

Outcomes 5–10 are more “aspirational,” meaning they are long-term outcomes/goals identified by Adopter Schools, but the outcome evidence isn’t there yet because programs are still in their early stages. The evaluation team will continue to track these and report back.

**5 Reduction in Dropout Rates** – Schools with Multiple Pathways programs reported lower dropout rates by providing alternative routes for students who might otherwise disengage from traditional schooling.

**6 Improved Employment Opportunities** – Participants in these programs gain exposure to better job opportunities and higher earning potential. They can acquire the skills and credentials needed to secure well-paying and stable employment.

**7 Lifelong Learning** – These programs instill a lifelong learning mindset, encouraging participants to continue their education and skill development beyond the program's completion.

**8 Social Mobility** – Multiple pathways programs promote social mobility by offering opportunities to underserved populations, helping them break the cycle of poverty and improve their quality of life.

**9 Diverse Workforce** – These programs contribute to a more diverse and inclusive workforce, bringing people from various backgrounds and experiences into different industries and professions.

**10 Community Development** – These programs can contribute to community development by building a skilled and educated local workforce, which can attract businesses and investment.