

2023 MAINE CHILDREN'S CABINET REPORT



GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF
Policy Innovation and the Future

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Governor Mills' Children's Cabinet

Soon after taking office in January 2019, Governor Mills reinstated the Children's Cabinet following an eight-year hiatus. Maine Children's Cabinet members include the Commissioners of the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Public Safety, and Corrections. DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew serves as chair of the Children's Cabinet. In collaboration with key staff from each of these agencies, the work of Governor Mills' Children's Cabinet is coordinated by a staff person in the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future.

The Children's Cabinet plays a vital role in convening and facilitating coordination across State agencies on initiatives and policies that will improve and promote the healthy development of children and youth in Maine. Staff from the Departments comprising the Children's Cabinet meet regularly to maintain open communication about changes and developments in programming and policies across state agencies for children and youth, coordinate the implementation

of specific strategies, and identify new opportunities to collaborate across programs to advance the Children's Cabinet's strategies and goals.

The Children's Cabinet strategic plans lay out two overarching goals:

- All Maine children enter kindergarten prepared to succeed
- All Maine youth enter adulthood healthy, connected to the workforce and/or education

Children's Cabinet Achievements in 2023

In 2023, state agencies involved in the work of the Children's Cabinet continued to make significant process in implementing strategies laid out in the Children's Cabinet Plan for Young Children (see Appendix A) and the Children's Cabinet Plan for Youth (see Appendix B).

This report outlines the initiatives for young children and youth that moved forward in 2023 and highlights plans for continued implementation of the Children's Cabinet strategies in 2024.



STRATEGIES TO PREPARE CHILDREN FOR KINDERGARTEN

The Children’s Cabinet Plan for Young Children has provided a roadmap for much of the state’s work to improve programs and services for young children and their families. Staff and members of the Children’s Cabinet originally developed its plan for young children in the fall of 2019, pulling from the learnings of the comprehensive needs assessment conducted by the Department of Education (DOE) and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) as part of the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Birth through Five planning grant from the federal government. Through conversations with parents, child care providers, social service agency representatives, and others, the assessment identified a series of priority needs. The Children’s Cabinet used the results of the needs assessment to shape the plan for young children. In 2023, the Children’s Cabinet updated its plan in 2023 to incorporate the strategies of the Perinatal Systems of Care work to better support expecting and new parents and their babies during the first critical year of life. Through the work of the current Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Renewal Grant, the state is in the process of updating its needs assessment which will inform the work of the Cabinet moving forward.

Staff from DHHS and DOE are collaborating and coordinating on efforts to strengthen and link programs within Maine’s early childhood system. Multiple state offices are involved in this effort including staff from DHHS’s Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) and Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) and DOE’s Early Learning (EL) Team. Maine’s early childhood system includes critical early intervention services, health care programming for young children, and early care and education programs such as licensed child care programs, Head Start and public Pre-K.

Strengthening Maine’s Early Childhood Education System

Through the work of the Children’s Cabinet, staff from DHHS and DOE are coordinating efforts to increase access to quality and affordable early childhood education programs through a mixed delivery birth through five system.

OCFS at the DHHS plays a key role in providing services to support families and their children in accessing quality early childhood education. OCFS oversees the administration of Maine’s Child Care Development Block Grant. This work includes managing the Maine’s Child Care Affordability Program, Child Care Licensing and Investigation Services, Quality Rating and Improvement System, and the state’s contract with the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN). The MRTQ PDN works to promote and support professionalism in the field of early childhood education and to improve quality through the provision of a statewide system of professional development.

Maine DOE’s Early Learning (EL) Team promotes children’s learning by offering information and resources to support public early elementary, preschool



and Head Start teachers and administrators involved in educating Maine's young learners. The EL staff provide guidance and tools to increase access to high-quality public preschool and Head Start; strengthen and align instruction, assessment, and curriculum to established standards; support the professional development of early childhood (Pre-K to Grade 3) professionals in public preschools and Head Start; assist families in supporting their child's learning; and inform policy, planning, and research-based practice.

Preschool Development Renewal Grant Awarded to Maine

The Office of Child and Family Services, in partnership with the Early Learning Team and Child Development Services at DOE, was awarded a Preschool Development (B-5) Renewal Grant in December 2022. The grant award is \$8 million per year for three years. The grant will support Maine's ability to build needed infrastructure and capacity to create a more coordinated, efficient, and high-quality mixed delivery system for children ages birth to five and their families, targeting key needs surfaced in the initial PDG needs assessment.

The initiatives funded through the grant build upon the successful cross agency work of the Children's Cabinet to ensure that all children enter kindergarten prepared to succeed. Staff will continue to work to ensure coordination across the entire early childhood system with an added focus on improving coordination and transitions into the early elementary years at public schools. Many of these initiatives are underway and are highlighted throughout this report.

Child Care Stabilization Grants Support Child Care Industry

Since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the state has invested more than \$100 million in direct grants to child care programs (both center and home-based facilities) with COVID relief funding from the federal government. The continuation of federally funded monthly grants to child care programs from OCFS helped to stabilize and support the field through most of 2023.

Between October 2021 and the end of September 2022, OCFS provided over \$73 million in stabilization grants from funding in the American Rescue Plan. Maine was one of the first states to make this stabilization funding available to all licensed child care programs. These monthly grants provided each program with \$100 per licensed child care slot, \$200 stipends for each staff working directly with children and payments based upon a program's quality rating and acceptance of the Child Care Subsidy Program.

Following the expiration of the ARPA child care stabilization funds, OCFS used increased federal funds from the Child Care Development Fund to offer Provider Transition Grants to scale down the monthly grants over an 11 month period. Licensed child care programs continued to receive reduced monthly grants through August 2023. These transition grants provided an additional \$13.6 million in child care programs between October 2022 and September 2023.

Expanded Investments in Maine's Early Childhood Education Workforce

The 2019 Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment identified low pay as a primary barrier to recruiting and retaining staff. The pandemic and the increased labor shortages following the pandemic exacerbated this challenge for child care programs in Maine. Data from the May 2022 Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the mean wage for a child care worker in Maine is \$15.42 per hour or \$32,080 a year. This is 40





percent less than the state's average wage for all occupations. Over the last several years, child care directors and owners reported significant challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified educators and spoke about their challenges with competing with employers who raised wages to recruit new staff in the tight labor market. Many child care programs are apprehensive to raise their costs because they ultimately have to pass these costs on to parents who may already be struggling to pay their weekly fees for child care.

To address concerns about recruiting and retaining staff, the Office of Child and Family Services included \$200 per month stipends as part of the Child Care Stabilization Grants funded through the federal American Rescue Plan. In 2022, the Governor and Speaker Ryan Fecteau worked together to continue these stipends following the expiration of the stabilization funds through the supplemental budget process. Led by Senate President Troy Jackson, the legislature and the Governor included in the final Biennial Budget for FY 23/24 and 24/25 funding to double the investment in the salary supplement program. As the Office of Child and Family Services increased the stipends to reflect the increased investments, they also implemented rule changes to move to a new three-tiered

system that provides higher stipends for early childhood educators with greater experience and level of education. The new tier levels are linked to the state's quality registry level with Tier 1 at \$275 per month, Tier 2 at \$415 per month and Tier 3 at \$625 per month.

The decision to move to a system of tiered salary supplements was informed by feedback from the child care listening sessions in the fall of 2021. A significant majority of participants from all of the listening sessions advocated for a tiered approach based upon education and experience. There was a clear preference for monthly payments and wage supplements over tax credits. Office of Child and Family Services will use funding from the Preschool Development Grant to evaluate the implementation of the ECE Workforce Salary Supplement to help determine if the program is helping to reach its intended purpose.

Efforts to Expand Maine's Child Care Infrastructure

When developing her 10-year state economic plan, the Governor traveled the state speaking to employers about their needs. Access to child care for their employees was often towards the top of their lists. Recognizing the need to increase access to quality child care,

Governor Mills' Jobs and Recovery Plan included \$15 million for grants to renovate, expand, or construct child care facilities to increase the number of licensed child care slots.

Prior to the pandemic, analysis by the Bipartisan Policy Center, in partnership with Maine's Office of Child and Family Policy, confirmed that Maine has a gap in formal licensed child care for working parents. While Maine's overall gap in child care was less than most other states, the analysis estimated that the number of Maine children under six with all available parents working exceeded the number of licensed child care slots by 4,920 (9.2%), and the gap was higher in rural areas.

The pandemic exacerbated this problem for families in Maine. While most programs remained or re-opened during the pandemic, Maine experienced a decline in the number of licensed slots. The stabilization grants and other key investments supported a rebound in the

number of licensed slots in Maine, leaving the state with more licensed slots than prior to the start of the pandemic. A 2022 analysis from the Bipartisan Policy Center shows that the overall gap has decreased from 4,921 slots to 3,079 slots, a 34 percent improvement. However, this gap in child care slots remains a concern for OCFS staff and the Children's Cabinet. More slots are needed to meet the needs of working parents in our state.

These start up and expansion grants will help to address the on-going child care gap in the state by providing grant funding to programs, both center and home-based programs, to cover "bricks and mortar" costs to expand the number of child care slots throughout the state. The grants prioritize the expansion of slots for infants and toddlers and in underserved areas.

As of January 2024, the Office of Child and Family Services had awarded 157 grants totaling almost \$10



million to support the start-up or expansion of child care facilities, both center-based and family child care programs. These awards are estimated to create almost 4000 child care slots in all 16 counties, with more than 2,500 of those slots already available.

Implementation and Expansion of Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program

Stakeholders participating in the 2019 PDG needs assessment identified the increased stress of working with children with high needs as a factor in staff retention. Early results from the updating of the PDG needs assessment point to a continued need to provide the necessary tools to early childhood educators to address the social emotional needs of children in their programs. In 2023, the Office of Child and Family Services, thanks to legislation passed by Senator Cathy Breen, expanded the Maine Early Childhood Consultation Program (ECCP) statewide to address this need.

The Early Childhood Consultation Partnership is an evidence-based, time-limited, and intensive consultation service that helps child care providers, educators, and caregivers of young children build both an understanding of the social-emotional needs of children and the skills to meet those needs. All services are provided at no cost to providers and families. Mental health consultants trained in the ECCP model work directly with child care staff, educators, and the child's caregiver(s) to identify and implement strategies to support children's emotional wellbeing and effectively manage challenging behavior that may otherwise jeopardize a child's ability to participate in an early childhood education setting.

In addition to offering consultation services to Head Start and licensed child care programs, OCFS worked closely with the Department of Education to expand programming to public schools for children in Pre-K to 2nd grade and licensed afterschool programs. A statewide cross-agency workgroup, which includes staff from OCFS, Child Development Services, Maine Roads to Quality, and the Center for Community Inclusion & Disability, meets regular to support the

integration of ECCP into the continuum of supports for early care and intervention.

Since implementation began in January of 2021, 149 classroom consultations have occurred with the potential to impact 2,004 children and the consultants have provided 229 child-specific consultations. Home visits and family involvement is a key component of the child-specific consultation services. Consultants have made 251 home visits to work directly with caregivers and made 170 referrals to services for children needing care.

The Maine ECCP program has shown year-to-year growth in improvement in classroom climate outcomes as measured by the CLASS tool, with 82% of classrooms receiving ECCP classroom consultation showing improvement in at least one academic or social emotional dimension in the Pre-K CLASS tool in 2023. The CLASS tool is a research-based tool for measuring, evaluating, and monitoring change in teacher-student interactions and is used within public Pre-K and some child care programs nationwide to measure outcomes in academic and social-emotional outcomes for children.

OCFS will continue to monitor outcomes and ensure that ECCP services are delivered with high quality and are accessible throughout the state so that children can enjoy nurturing, responsive, and high-quality early care and education.



"Our ECCP experience was incredibly supportive in modifying routines and social emotional supports for the children in my program. The children are better able to express their needs and their peers are better prepared to assist in meeting these needs. It has been an incredible transformation among children who are only 2 and 3 years old.

The ECCP program has helped to prepare these children with a solid foundation of problem-solving. Without the gentle support of the ECCP consultant, I would have undoubtedly closed my program in the coming year after 23 very successful years. I can proudly and happily say that I am confident my program will now remain open, and I know I can request services if I am ever in need."

—Quote from a Family Child Care Provider from York County who participated in ECCP in 2023. Consultation was provided onsite for approximately eight weeks and focused on building the provider's capacity to promote positive social-emotional development and manage challenging behaviors. The provider signed a release authorizing Maine ECCP to utilize the quote for reporting purposes.



Improving Transitions for Young Children into Public School

The efforts of the Children's Cabinet Coordinator, staff from the Early Learning Team and Child Development Services at DOE, and staff from the Office of Child and Family Services at DHHS have resulted in several resources to improve transitions for young children into public schools, particularly from preschool into kindergarten. Starting public school can be a significant transition for children and families that can be filled with mixed emotions, worries, and many questions. Smoothing this transition for children can help them to adjust to their new setting and better prepare them to learn and succeed in school.

Staff have constructed a website devoted to support families/caregivers as well as educators with materials to support transitions in public school. One of the key resources included in the website is a collection of professional learning modules geared for community teams composed of educators, early care and education providers, parents, and caregivers to use to deepen their understanding of transitions and strategies to support successful transitions as well as to develop responsive transitions plans for their local communities. The modules have been utilized over the course of the past year to provide professional learning through an online training series, at conference workshops, and in an ongoing Community of Practice experience running through the 2023-24 school year. A facilitator guide has also been added to the collection to support local level utilization of the modules.

Ongoing evaluation of opportunities which leverage the use of these resources will continue to inform the development of materials, training, and technical assistance within the field as well as other initiatives to support elementary schools and community partners to better coordinate and collaborate to align educational systems and streamline these transitions for children and families.

Learning Series to Increase Knowledge of Early Childhood Development and Programming for School Administrators

In response to the significant growth in the number of Maine elementary schools operating public Pre-K programs over the last decade, Maine's PDG Needs Assessment pointed to the need for more training for elementary administrators on quality care and education for young children. Between 2020-2022, Maine researched, designed, and piloted the Leading Early Learning series, which is grounded in the National Association for Elementary School Principals six research-based competencies for effective instructional leadership among Pre-K to grade 3 principals.

The competencies focus on aligned learning continua, environments, developmentally appropriate teaching, assessment, professional development, and engaging families and communities. The series includes five online, facilitated modules, each coupled with professional learning community experiences, along with participation in a statewide early childhood confer-

ence. 40 administrators have been supported through the cohorts offered during the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, with the third cohort underway in 2023-24 serving another 21 administrators.

Findings from evaluations of the first two cohorts documented significant increases in participant:

- knowledge of early childhood development standards and best practices;
- ability to identify resources and key components of high-quality early childhood programming; and
- confidence to employ early childhood leadership practices and actions.

Administrators who have completed the series are able to participate in an ongoing community of practice (COP) that enables them to remain connected with each other, share successes, and collaboratively address problems of practice. Promising practices identified



through the Leading Early Learning series and subsequent COPs will be shared with institutions of higher education and Maine’s State Board of Education to inform requirements for administrators working in early elementary settings.

Grants to Expand Public Pre-K to More Four-Year-Old Children in Maine

The Children’s Cabinet is committed to expanding public Pre-K for 4-year-old children in Maine. Public Pre-K for 4-year-old children is an important component of a mixed delivery system for early childhood care and education for children from birth through age five. Public Pre-K programming is currently provided through School Administrative Units in Maine. In 2022, efforts by the state led to an all-time high in the number of 4-year-old children enrolled in public Pre-k with enrollment at almost 6,400 children, or 55% of all 4-year-olds.

The Governor included \$10 million in her Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan to support the expansion of

public Pre-K. This funding provides grants to School Administrative Units (SAUs) for start-up costs to help overcome barriers to expanding or starting up new programs in their schools. In addition, the funding supports SAUs to expand from part-time programming to full day, full week programming. Research shows that full-day/full-week programming has greater benefits for children including higher scores in school readiness, greater school attendance and reduced chronic absences. Full-day/full-week programming results in children having fewer transitions throughout the day and better meets the needs of working parents who are juggling work and care for their children.

Over the last decade, the state greatly expanded the number of schools providing public Pre-K to 4-year-old children. Not surprisingly, enrollment numbers dropped dramatically during the 2020-2021 school year when many schools were operating on a hybrid schedule with a mix of in-person and virtual school days. In 2021-2022 school year, enrollment in public

Public Pre-K Expansion

Four School Administrative Units in Piscataquis and Penobscot Counties used funding from the Pre-K E Expansion Grants and from Child Development Services to start up one pre-k classroom with a combination of children with special needs and typically developing children. The program is also providing one-on-one education and services for eight 4-year-olds who are not quite ready to enter a traditional classroom. As children with special needs become ready, they are transitioned into the mainstream classroom.

This collaboration has allowed the SAU’s to provide education to all of the 4-year-old children in their catchment areas. The SAU’s hired a pre-k coordinator to facilitate communication between the leaders at the four SAUs, help with coordinating transportation services for all of the participating 4-year-olds, and ensure that teachers, ed techs and students are getting the supports and services that they need to make the program successful. School administrators and teachers are pleased with the progress of the children in the pre-k programming. These 4-year-olds will be entering their kindergartens in the fall of 2024 and the education and services they are getting are preparing them for that transition.





Pre-K rebounded but remained lower than in previous school years. With the support of the Pre-K Expansion Grants, the Department of Education had awarded grants to 30 School Administrative Units (SAUs) to expand public Pre-K to 4-year-olds. These grants provided start-up funds to support schools to start new public Pre-K programs, expand existing programs and/or move from part-time programming to full-week, full-time programming. To date, the grants have led to more than 950 seats created or converted to fulltime.

PDG Funds Pilot Projects to Expand Public Pre-K through Partnerships

Through the PDG B-5 Renewal Grant, the Early Learning Team is leading an effort to explore different funding and delivery models for public Pre-K expansion by piloting expanded partnerships between schools and community partners. To guide this work, the Early Learning Team at DOE has pulled together an Advisory Team, representative of Maine's early care and education mixed delivery system. This team has been tasked with: 1) studying the current funding model for public pre-K; 2) exploring opportunities for greater partnerships between schools and community part-

ners, such as child care and Head Start programs to expand public Pre-K; 3) considering the ramifications of various partnership and funding designs, and 4) recommending pilot projects to test new designs that will increase access to public Pre-K through partnership models.

The Advisory Team began meeting in the summer of 2023 and is currently in the process of developing its recommendations for the first round of grants for the 2024/25 school year to support new public Pre-K slots through community partnerships. The grants are expected to fund the expansion of 50 new public Pre-K slots for 4-year-olds. The Early Learning Team and the Advisory Team will continue to meet and develop recommendations for a second round of grants for the 2025/26 school year, providing funds for 100 public Pre-K slots for 4-year-olds.

As a result of these pilots to expand public pre-K, the state expects to: 1) gather information to guide decision making about alternative program designs and funding structures for the provision of public Pre-K; 2) increase ECE options for parents; and 3) enhance the quality of early learning environments for children.

Strengthening Early Childhood Care and Education Through Local Collaborations

First 10 Community School Pilots

With funding from the PDG (B-5) Renewal Grant, the Early Learning Team had DOE has awarded grants to three School Administrative Units (SAUs) to establish First 10 Community School Pilots. In 2024, the team will award three additional grants to new SAU's. First 10 Community Schools (F10CS) bring together school systems, early childhood programs, and community partners/agencies to improve care and education for young children and their families throughout the first 10 years of children's lives.

First 10 Community School partnerships work to improve teaching and learning, deepen partnerships with families, and connect comprehensive services to children and families. Typical First 10 practices include, but are not limited to:

- fostering engagement of families with schools and community partners,
- providing play and learn groups linked to elementary schools,
- coordinating connections to health and social services,
- connecting child care providers with elementary schools,
- improving the quality of early childhood programs,
- coordinating the transition to kindergarten,
- conducting joint professional learning among early childhood, Pre-K and elementary teachers, and
- aligning and improving elementary grade curriculum and instruction.

By the end of 2023, all of the awardees had formed F10CS Leadership Teams that include both school staff as well as staff from community partners. During their formation, members of these leadership teams commit to maintaining collaborative relationships to ensure that teams can effectively carry out their plans and achieve their goals for children and families.

All of the awardees have successfully hired F10CS Outreach Coordinators. These outreach coordinators

have started to build connections and relationships with parents of young children in the community through play and learn groups and with staff at local child care programs to strengthen connections across the early care and education system and the school system and begin to develop and implement strategies for supporting smoother transitions into kindergarten for children and families.

First4ME Community Coalition Pilots

First4ME was established in statute in 2021 and seeks to improve the social, emotional, educational, and health outcomes for children under the age of six through increasing access to high quality early care and education. The program is modeled on a two-generation, community-based approach for a coordinated birth to kindergarten-entry program that integrates comprehensive resources and services into child care settings and incorporates wrap around services, including family support and stabilization.

Following a competitive grant application process in the summer of 2023, four non-profit organizations were awarded grants to establish three-year pilot projects in their communities. Since August 2023, these nonprofits have focused on getting their sites up and running, hiring new staff, onboarding child care programs and families, and developing baseline data. The pilot project runs from August 2023 to July of 2026.

Through the work of these pilots, additional high quality early care and education opportunities will be created, impacting over 650 children across five school administrative units. Intensive supports will be provided for 18 child care programs and 164 early care and education professionals. An evaluation of the pilot and its impact on children, families, child care programs and schools is being conducted concurrently. The evaluation will inform future decisions regarding the program with consideration for community responsive practice, permanency of First4ME and possible expansion to other communities interested in implementing this framework.

INTEGRATING AND ALIGNING PROGRAMS

The Children’s Cabinet Early Intervention Workgroup Focused on Integrating and Aligning Programs and Services for Children from Birth through Age Five

The Children’s Cabinet Early Intervention Workgroup is comprised of DHHS and DOE staff who provide early intervention services for children birth through five years old. Members of workgroup include staff from the Maternal and Child Health Division at the Maine CDC, the divisions of Children’s Behavioral Health and Early Care and Education at the Office of Child and Family Services, the Office of Family Independence, the Early Learning Team at DOE, Child Development Services, Office of MaineCare Services and the DHHS Commissioner’s Office.

The Early Intervention Workgroup provides an opportunity for staff managing early intervention policies

and programs for young children to coordinate and collaborate efforts to better serve families with young children and ensure that young children receive the necessary screenings, evaluations, and services to support their healthy development. The Early Intervention Workgroup is focused on the implementation of three key initiatives that support its goal of integrating and aligning maternal and early childhood programs and services. This includes: 1) the implementation of Help Me Grow, 2) efforts to increase rates of developmental screenings through the implementation of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) online, and 3) the alignment of the perinatal system of care initiatives with other early childhood initiatives.



Connecting Families to Needed Programs and Services Through Implementation of Help Me Grow

Help Me Grow (HMG) is a free informational service linking families and professionals to information about child development, pregnancy, and community resources for children and families. The intent of the program is to increase knowledge of the services available for children and families and connect families to service providers. Help Me Grow also enhances connections among service providers to ensure an accessible and interconnected system. HMG offers developmental screenings to help parents better understand their children's developmental milestones and support referrals to needed services. Parents can complete the ASQ screening tool and if the results indicate areas of concern, they can use the information to speak with their child's PCP and/or other providers.

Help Me Grow (HMG) has been fully operational in Maine since November 2022. Since its inception as the central access point connecting families of children 0-8 years of age with developmental information and resources, HMG has provided families with over 1,300 resources to assist them in meeting their children's needs. Many families called Help Me Grow to obtain information and resources about their child's developmental milestones or to get support to address their child's behavioral and/or mental health issues. Parents' basic needs for their child, such as diapers, formula, and car seats were the third most common concern among parents statewide. Parents of the youngest children served by HMG most commonly seek out resources to meet their child's basic needs, with many of these concerns voiced by parents who were New Mainers.

In 2023, one in five families served by HMG identified a language other than English as their preferred language. With funding allocated by the Preschool Development Grant, HMG hired a Family Support Specialist to fulfill the role of cultural broker. This position is designed to assist families in meeting the unique needs of Immigrant/Refugee/Asylees families, helping them to overcome barriers to access resources.

A particular need identified was assistance with transportation to appointments. HMG is currently partnering with the Department of Transportation to provide car seat training to Ethnic Community Based Organizations (ECBOs) that can help alleviate the barrier of accessing car seats. Additionally, HMG is exploring ways that strollers may be purchased to assist with accessing community resources.

HMG has identified many barriers that families frequently encounter when attempting to access resources within their communities. A total of 131 barriers were identified among 89 families, with some families experiencing multiple barriers at the same time. The most common barriers identified were waitlists (21%), followed by eligibility and language (both 16%). Of these cases with known outcomes, 59% of families experiencing a barrier were successfully connected to one or more services, with an additional 9% of families pending service, largely due to the hard work of HMG Family Support Specialists.

The HMG Outreach Specialist works daily to ensure that healthcare providers, community providers, and early care and education providers are aware of HMG. To date, 14,920 community providers and professionals have received an outreach presentation regarding how HMG can assist Maine's families.



Seedling to Sunflowers: Investing in Maine's Future

For the teachers at Seedlings to Sunflowers, a non-profit child care center in Gorham, early childhood learning is a fundamental community investment that is a critical part of kindergarten readiness. That's something owner and advocate Meghann Carrasco has seen an increasing amount of support for in recent years.

"There are more Child Development Services (CDS) interventions, and we're recognizing that it's important to have that before they enter school," said Carrasco. "I've definitely seen a shift in the general public's understanding of Pre-K, and I want to make sure that it is seen as a professional livelihood."



She's no stranger to the issues facing child care and the critical need for it as a way to support a healthy, growing workforce in Maine. When she founded Seedlings to Sunflowers six years ago, it was the result of years of prior work in the sector, including working in child care and nannying as a college student in Bangor.

"I love education. I'm an eternal student," she said. "I love literacy and watching my children's literacy and math skills develop. The more I've gotten into the field, the more in love with it I am."



Thanks to a Child Care Infrastructure Grant of \$250,000 back in March 2023, she's been able to invest in an 8000 square foot space that contributes to the expansion of access to preschool for ages 3 through 5, conveniently located along a major commuter route in town. Seedlings and Sunflowers currently operates 4 Pre-K classrooms, with space to expand to a maximum capacity of 139 Pre-School students serving ages 3-5.

She's partnered with Gorham schools to offer public Pre-K in two of these classrooms and on supporting social and emotional learning for all of her students in order to prepare them for kindergarten.

"Our population is growing and we're going to need more care," she said. "We wouldn't have been able to do this without the grant."



Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant Leads to Greater Focus on Efforts to Reach Underserved Populations

In August 2021, the Maine CDC was awarded a five-year Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant from the US Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). A Systems Assessment and Gap Analysis (SAGA) conducted by the Maine CDC helped to set the agenda for this work.

Through the SAGA, the CDC team identified three key areas of focus that were missing among existing work happening across the state for the Prenatal through 3 system:

1. **Equity:** Address inequities in Maine P-3 system and improving access to and coordination of P-3 services and programs for underserved populations.
2. **Parent Engagement:** Enhance family leadership and parental engagement.
3. **Perinatal Systems of Care:** Build on and strengthen linkages between the state's early childhood system and the health sector, particularly in the areas of perinatal systems of care and early intervention services for children 0-3.

In addition, the CDC team established a new advisory group of stakeholders (the Collaborating Partners Advisory Group) that meets quarterly to provide input on efforts to reach the goals of the ECCS Health Inte-

gration P-3 program. This group includes advocates, community partners and providers, parents, and state agency staff. During the regular meetings, this group provides feedback on the integration and coordination of early childhood programs as well as the implementation of Help Me Grow.

The Maine CDC team is working closely with staff from the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) to expand parent engagement and leadership. In partnership with the Office of Child and Family Services, the team provided funding to Educare Maine to expand its nationally recognized Parent Ambassador program to reach more parents throughout the state. The Parent Ambassador program, which had originally worked with parents whose children were participating in Head Start, expanded its cohorts to include parents who have children enrolled in licensed child care programs and/or Child Development Services. In 2024, OCFS and the Maine CDC team will work with Educare Maine and Portland Empowered to develop a new parent leadership program, specifically geared towards New Mainer parents with young children.

Strengthening Maine's Perinatal Systems of Care Work to Support the Health and Well-being of Pregnant People, Parents, and Infants

Since 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has led efforts to strengthen the Maine's programs and policies for pregnant people, new parents and infants. DHHS leadership established the Perinatal System of Care Working Partners group, bringing together partners in health care, social services, and state agencies to implement new initiatives and ensure better coordination between programs. In Maine, the perinatal system of care is defined as preconception (3 months prior to pregnancy) to one-year post-partum and includes the care of the baby from birth to the first birthday.

In 2023, there were many activities across DHHS, DOE, and Department of Public Safety to improve the Perinatal System of Care. The Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Program at the Maine CDC supports

many core programs that involve the Perinatal System. Their programs support newborn screenings and referrals to early intervention services for babies born in Maine. Those screenings include the newborn blood-spot screening, which screens for 33 genetic conditions, the newborn hearing program, and congenital heart disease screening. Additionally, the MCH program oversees the Birth Defects Program, which provides surveillance around the various reportable birth defects that are statutorily mandated to be reported to the State. The MCH program also supports the Public Health Nursing (PHN) Program and the Cradle ME referral system with the state match for the Federal MCH Block Grant to ensure families have access to PHN, Maine Families Home Visiting (MFHV), WIC, Child Development Services (CDS) and the Maine-MOM program.

In 2023, the Maine CDC Maternal and Child Health Program continued its public Safe Sleep Campaign, and added a second Perinatal Nurse Educator for the state to work with hospitals in the northern region. As part of the COVID Disparity Funds, the Maine CDC's Perinatal Nurse Educators and the Maine EMS for Children (EMS-C) program worked together to build infrastructure to care for and handle maternal emergencies. The Maine EMS for Children (EMS-C) program, within the DPS, received a federal grant funding in April of 2023, providing 100% funding for the next four years. Efforts are focused on EMS and Emergency Department readiness for pediatric and infant emergencies, improving quality metrics for care and transport of infants and children, improving education opportunities, and collaboration across the continuum of care for infants, children, and pregnant people.

Complementing these DHHS perinatal efforts, the Department of Education and Child Development Services (CDS) supported perinatal health by improving family and professional partnerships and training all CDS Part C staff in evidence-based models supporting early infant brain development and healthy early relationships. (CDS Part C provides early intervention services for children under age 3.) In 2023, CDS did a

pilot in York County with the mobile based Mammha program, which is a maternal mental health support and referral service for pregnant and postpartum women who think they may be experiencing maternal mental health symptoms. Staff also continued training in the Brazelton Touchpoints Approach™ (0-36 months) and Newborn Behavioral Observations (NBO) System™ (0-3 months). Further, in September 2023, prenatal alcohol exposure was added to the CDS' Established Conditions List that make children under the age of 3 automatically eligible for Early Intervention Services through Part C. CDS also worked on rebranding Part C services to “Early Intervention for ME” to improve engagement with families.

Expansion of MaineCare for new mothers and children from birth through age 20

There were several policy changes related to the perinatal system of care that are important to highlight. In 2023, the Office of MaineCare Services (OMS) continued to message to their members the 2022 policy changes around expansion of coverage to pregnant people to 12 months post-partum, expanded dental coverage to adults, including pregnant people eligible for MaineCare, and coverage of the Unborn Child Option (or pregnant people without citizenship). A communications campaign was launched in August 2023 to promote MaineCare coverage to eligible people who are pregnant or are under 21, with or without citizenship. In December 2023, 12-month postpartum coverage was expanded to the unborn child population. OMS, in partnership with the Maine CDC, also created materials to inform pregnant and post-partum people about Medicaid coverage with the unwinding process happening with the end of the Public Health Emergency.

Further, in October 2023, OMS expanded MaineCare coverage to children and young adults under 21 who are in families who make an annual income up to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level. A communications campaign was launched to promote this coverage, and a toolkit with print and digital materials is available for partners and providers.



Improving Care for Pregnant People with Substance Use Disorder and Infants

MaineMOM program

Improving care for pregnant people with substance use disorder and infants exposed to substances during pregnancy is also part of the perinatal system of care work. In 2023, MaineCare worked with health care providers on the MaineMOM program to improve care for pregnant and postpartum people with opioid use disorder and their infants by integrating maternal and substance use treatment services. In 2023, MaineCare finalized a new section of policy, Section 89, to reimburse for MaineMOM Services. In addition, MaineMOM supported the Perinatal Quality Collaborative for Maine's (PQC4ME) Universal Naloxone Project: A Postpartum Toolkit for Harm Reduction and additional training on the Eat, Sleep, Console (ESC) model to improve care for substance exposed infants (SEI) in the birth hospitals.

MaineMOM partnered with Child Development Services (CDS), Part C in 2023 to update eligibility standards for the program. All babies born in Maine who receive a SEI report are eligible for enrollment in CDS and receipt of services. The offices are currently partnering to train and certify up to 4 CDS staff members in the evidence based Attachment, Biobehavioral Catch-Up

(ABC) early intervention program to provide coaching to new parents, with a goal to train staff in every region to spread ABC services across the state. Starting in 2024, Office of MaineCare Services (OMS) will work in tight collaboration with CDS, Part C, to streamline and increase referrals into their services.

MaineCare for Parents with Substance Use Disorder

In July 2022, OMS received federal approval to expand services for MaineCare-enrolled parents with Substance Use Disorder (SUD), who are involved with Child Welfare Services under the Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), or at risk of being involved with Child Welfare Services. With this waiver, Maine is the first state in the nation approved to offer continued Medicaid coverage for members who might otherwise lose access during the Child Welfare process due to changes in household size. This was operationalized and implemented on May 1, 2023. Parents who are successfully engaging with the Department through the rehabilitation and reunification process can continue their coverage, supporting them in accessing SUD treatment and other critical medical care.

Plan of Safe Care For All Substance Exposed Infants and their Caregivers

The OCFS Child Well Being Team continues to work collaboratively with prenatal providers and birthing hospitals, as well as the Cradle Me team, to create a Plan of Safe Care (POSC) for all substance exposed infants and their caregivers. In the fall of 2023, the new online POSC portal was implemented to allow for transition from paper to electronic versions of a Plan of Safe Care. The POSC nurse ensures that each SEI receives a Plan of Safe Care and connects caregivers to resources to help with identified needs. The Maine CDC and OCFS also worked with Data, Research and Vital Statistics (DRVS) to update the birth certificate worksheet to add a module on substance exposure during pregnancy and POSC completion to improve surveillance data.

Federal Grants Enhance the Perinatal Systems of Care Work

Under the leadership of the Perinatal System of Care Working Partners, the state of Maine and several partner organizations have successfully applied for and received a series of competitive grant funds to enhance its work in this area. In 2021-23, Maine received over \$10 million in federal grants for five years to support the expansion of work to strengthen the system of care for pregnant people, new parents, and infants.

Maine's Maternal and Child Health Program at the Maine CDC received a \$5 million State Maternal Health Innovations and Data Capacity (MHIDC) grant for five years to work with partners to address risk factors facing birthing people before and during pregnancy that can cause pregnancy loss and death in pregnant people. In 2023, the MHIDC grant supported the following initiatives:

- Maine CDC published a new Perinatal Data Dashboard and is working to provide resources to enhance the collection, analysis, and review of data related to deaths and serious health issues associated with pregnancy and birth to improve health outcomes for pregnant people and infants across the state and is working with the Division

of Vital Records to upgrade fetal death records submission and maternal and infant death record collection.

- Funding is supporting Maine's birthing hospitals with the implementation of the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health (AIM) Safety Bundles, a maternal quality improvement safety program, designed to address high risk issues in pregnant patients and provide a standardized approach for providers to offer integrated patient-centered screenings, education, and monitoring to improve care for pregnant people.

The Maine Medical Association also received more than \$1.6 million in funding, from two separate federal grants, to work with partners to increase capacity to make improvements in care statewide through the Perinatal Quality Collaborative for ME (PQC4ME), including expanding the implementation of the AIM Severe Hypertension in Pregnancy Safety Bundle to all Maine's birthing hospitals. This work is advancing health equity in the diagnosis and management of hypertension during pregnancy, and expanding Maine's capacity to review maternal deaths, as part of the existing Maternal Fetal and Infant Mortality Review Panel (MFIMR) at the Maine CDC. As part of the MFIMR work, in 2023, a full-time coordinator was added for the panel, a bereavement resources guide was updated, and the MFIMR panel was expanded and received additional training from the Federal CDC.





In 2022, MaineHealth received a \$4 million grant from HRSA over four years to improve access to and continuity of care for pregnant people and new parents in rural Maine with a focus on strengthening the state telehealth infrastructure for rural hospitals who need to access obstetrics consultation through the Rural Maternity and Obstetrics Management Strategies Program (RMOMS). In 2023, as part of the first grant planning year, RMOMS conducted an assessment of perinatal telehealth capacity and Rural Hospital Maternity Services, identifying maternal mental health, nutritional counseling for patients with gestational diabetes and remote monitoring for post-partum hypertension as priority areas. In 2023, RMOM started an Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes (ECHO) series, combining virtual case presentations and expert education to maternity providers on behavioral health topics. RMOMS will also be supporting Advance Life Support in Obstetrics™ (ALSO) trainings and build infrastructure throughout the state to offer emergency obstetric training.

Building an Early Childhood Integrated Data System to Inform Decision-making

The Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Birth through Age 5 (PDG B-5) Renewal Grant is supporting the development and implementation of a new Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS).

An ECIDS collects, integrates, maintains, stores, and reports information from early childhood programs across multiple agencies within a state that serve children and families from birth to age eight.

Maine's ECIDS will provide state leaders with information to make informed decisions about programs and policies that promote access, quality, and a strong workforce to support all Maine children ages 0-5. The ECIDS will serve as a tool to promote alignment and coordination of the early childhood system through better information sharing and a clearer picture of needs, gaps, and strengths of the system and it will be a resource that provides data-driven insights that can improve short- and long-term outcomes for children and families in Maine.

Maine has made progress in advancing the development of an ECIDS over the last several years. Maine worked with a national technical assistance team to draft and publish an *ECIDS Road Map for Maine* in 2022. This road map has guided the work to plan for the implementation of an ECIDS, starting with the hire of a Project Lead in December 2021 with ARPA Child Care Development Fund discretionary funds.

The ECIDS Project Lead has conducted a readiness assessment to map the data landscape for young children in Maine, supported the state to develop a clear purpose and vision for an ECIDS, informed the development of the State Longitudinal Data System at the MDOE in order to identify connections to a future ECIDS, and developed a plan for conducting data matches across early childhood programs to answer key policy questions and inform the development of an integrated data system. In 2024, the team will conduct at least two programmatic use cases which will march and integrate data from multiple data systems to answer key policy questions and inform the development of an integrated data system as well as the governance structure for the ECIDS.

STRATEGIES FOR ENTERING ADULTHOOD

Staff from several state agencies support the Children’s Cabinet to reach its goal of ensuring that all Maine youth enter adulthood healthy, connected to the workforce and/or education. This team includes: DHHS staff from the Office of Child and Family Services, the Maine CDC, MaineCare Services, and the Commissioner’s Office; DOE staff from the Office of Student and School Supports, Workforce Development and Innovative Pathways, the Commissioner’s Office and the Maine School Safety Center; Department of Corrections staff from the Office of Juvenile Services; Department of Labor staff from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Bureau of Employment Services; staff from the Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future.

This team has focused its efforts on expanding access to resources and services, including mental and behavioral health services and prevention programs that provide opportunities for youth to build positive relationships, leadership skills and make other connections that support their positive growth and development.

Increasing Access To Evidence-Based Behavioral Health Services For Youth

Children’s Behavioral Health Services (CBHS) in DHHS, in partnership with MaineCare Services, focuses on behavioral health treatment and services children from birth up to their 21st birthday. The agency has led the state’s efforts to reach the goal of expanding evidence-based behavioral health services for youth, including substance use disorder services and treatment, at the community level.

The final state biennial budget included a number of initiatives to strengthen children’s behavioral health services in Maine with a focus on expanding programming to support children and youth with complex behavioral health needs to stay in their homes and communities and out of facilities. The budget including new funding for High-Fidelity Wraparound Services

for children and youth, funding for Multi-dimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) and the establishment of an independent behavioral health level-of-care assessment process. CBHS is piloting other initiatives to expand behavioral health services with federal funds.

High-Fidelity Wraparound Services Takes Team Approach to Support Children and Youth with Complex Behavioral Health Needs

Children’s Behavioral Health Services is currently working with the Office of MaineCare Services to implement a High-Fidelity Wraparound service for children and youth with complex behavioral health needs. This service is expected to be reimbursable through MaineCare in SFY 2024/25. High-Fidelity Wraparound (Hi-Fi Wrap) is a team-based process and approach which uses the collective action of a committed group of family, friends, community, professionals, and cross-system supports to build a family-driven plan of care that best fits the goals and situation of the youth and the family. The care coordinator further helps the family navigate planned services and supports, including informal and community-based options; tracks progress and satisfaction to revise the plan of care as needed; and ensures program fidelity. The goal of the service is to keep children and youth in their homes and communities utilizing their formal and informal supports.



Multi-dimensional Family Therapy To Treat Youth Misusing Substances and with Mental Health Concerns

The budget included start-up costs to roll out training for behavioral health professionals in Multi-dimensional Family Therapy (MDFT). MDFT is a home and community-based therapeutic modality designed to treat youth experiencing substance use and mental health concerns with a family-centered approach. MDFT incorporates System of Care principles, is culturally informed and validated, and uses individual, family, and family-only sessions to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors, including substance use.

In the fall of 2023, OCFS began planning with MDFT International the roll out of a statewide MDFT training for 6 provider agencies. The plan is for each agency to train 2 supervisors and 6 clinicians. OCFS will contract with each participating agency to provide support beyond initial training. The training is expected to roll out in winter 2024. The Office of MaineCare Services is planning a rate determination for MDFT in 2024.

Implementation of a Single Point of Access for Children with Behavioral Health Needs

The complexity of accessing children's behavioral health services is a barrier for many children, youth, and families. To address this, the budget advanced funding for the implementation of a single point of access for children with significant behavioral health needs. Children's Behavioral Health Services has started working to establish an independent behavioral health level-of-care assessment process that will ensure that children and youth are identified, screened and connected with the appropriate level of services to meet their needs. The single assessment will be facilitated by a licensed Master's level clinician as an independent assessor. Clinicians will use a standardized assessment tool and process that has been endorsed by the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. The assessment process will incorporate child and family voice and consider the youth's clinical needs, environmental needs, and

family situation to match youth with the appropriate service based on their level of care.

Services included in the assessment will be:

- Children's Residential Care Facility Services (children at this level of service already are assessed using this process)
- Home and Community-based Treatment
- Multi-systemic Therapy
- Functional Family Therapy
- Intensive Outpatient Programs
- Assertive Community Treatment
- High-Fidelity Wraparound
- Rehabilitative and Community Support Services for Children with Cognitive Impairments and Functional Limitations (Section 28)

Pilot of Intercept Services Provides Intensive In-Home Services to Youth

Utilizing federal funding through the System of Care grant, the Intercept Pilot (Youth Villages) provides intensive in-home services to youth who are at risk of being placed in a Children's Residential Care Facility (CRCF) or on the Children's Home and Community Based Treatment (HCT) waitlist. Intercept is an evidence-based, intensive in-home skills program that was developed to prevent youth from entering out-of-home care or allow youth in facilities to reunify with family as quickly and safely as possible. The team consists of a Family Intervention Specialist, Clinical Supervisor, Regional Supervisor, and Licensed Program Experts.

The service is delivered to eligible youth on average of three times per week in the home or in the community for an average of four to six months, with twenty-four hour on-call crisis support available as well.

This pilot which is overseen by CBHS is offered to youth and families in York, Cumberland, and Oxford Counties. The pilot is focused on supporting Youth with Serious Emotional Disturbance who are transitioning from residential, waiting for residential or Home and Community Based Treatment, and/ or involved with the Department of Corrections.



Connecting Students at School to Tele-behavioral Health Services

OCFS in coordination with Maine CDC and DOE are conducting a tele-behavioral health services pilot supporting access to clinical behavioral health services in six schools. Using a model developed out of Heywood Health in western Massachusetts, this pilot supports access to behavioral health services by locating a community health worker (CHW) in schools. These CHWs facilitate access to clinical services and provide on-site support to the youth to pair them with a clinician providing telehealth counseling services. Reports from the first year of the pilot highlight the helpful role played by these CHWs placed in the schools. The CHWs support students and parents with accessing needed behavioral health services and assist with sharing information between the schools, parents and clinicians. The CHWs also help students and families connect to other resources outside of the school. The program is currently operating in seven high schools and middle schools.

Increasing Prevention Services and Programming In Schools and Communities

Expansion of School Based Health Centers to Better Meet Physical and Mental Health Needs of Youth

In 2022, the Department of Education allocated American Rescue Plan ESSER grant funding to middle and high schools to expand the number and scope of Maine's School Based Health Centers. A team of staff from the Commissioner's Office at DOE, the Maine CDC's Adolescent Health and Injury Prevention Program at DHHS and the Children's Cabinet conducted a series of informational sessions about the new funding opportunity in the spring of 2022.

The funding allowed for the start-up of new School Based Health Centers at four high schools. In addition, existing School Based Health Centers at seven sites received enhanced funding to improve operations, expand outreach and coordination of services to increase enrollment of students, and strengthen and expand their oral health services.

Maine now has 10 sponsor organizations and 20 School Based Health Center sites across the state. These School Based Health Centers share a commitment and collaboration between a school, community, and health care organization(s). SBHCs support students' health, well-being, and academic success by providing integrated medical, behavioral health and prevention services aimed at improving health equity. Services are student focused and offered to all eligible students regardless of insurance status or ability to pay.

In the 2022/23 school year, the number of students enrolled in a School Based Health Center increased by 18% and the number of visits to SBHCs by students increased by almost 40%. This was largely due to an increase in the number of behavioral health visits which also increased by 40%. Overall, 54% of visits were behavioral health visits, 37% were medical, and 10% were dental. The programs will continue to use the ESSER funding to expand their reach during this current school year.

Increasing and Coordinating Health Screenings for High School Students

In the fall of 2023, Maine CDC kicked off the implementation of a screening and detection pilot in four Maine high schools with School Based Health Centers. The purpose of the pilot is to support the early detection and intervention to reduce the incidence and prevalence of substance use/misuse among youth and young adults. The pilot is implementing the Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) technique, a comprehensive and clinically effective public health approach for identifying individuals who engage in risky substance use behaviors and intervening to prevent more severe consequences of use.¹ The project uses the CRAFFT 2.1 + N validated screening tool, the REACT (Reinforce, Educate, and Anticipate Challenges of Tomorrow) positive reinforcement model for reported non-use, and the BNI (Brief Negotiated Interview) to support brief intervention conversations between providers and students screened. The SBIRT Project Coordinator is working directly with SBHC staff to develop adolescent-specific referral lists to support them to make external referrals if needed. The pilot project has a number of goals including:



- Increase community awareness of health risks associated with substance use.
- Develop relationships with local prevention and treatment providers.
- Create a specific list of external treatment providers for both substance use and mental health services.
- Expand education opportunities for family and school staff around prevention.
- Increase enrollment in school-based health centers over the previous year
- Connect students who would otherwise not have a PCP to a dedicated provider through the school-based health center.
- Decrease in the number of students who face punitive repercussions for substance use violations.

Maine Prevention Network Provides SUD Prevention Programming Across the State

The Maine Prevention Network is a collaboration between the Maine CDC Tobacco and Substance Use Prevention and Control Program, Maine CDC Chronic Disease Programs (Obesity Prevention), and

community partners from each of the Public Health District. These community partners, with guidance from Maine CDC, implement evidence-based prevention programming for Substance Use, Tobacco, Obesity, and Youth Engagement and Empowerment.

As part of her effort to expand substance use prevention programming for students to every community and school, the Governor set aside \$1 million in opioid settlement funds to support each of the nine Maine Prevention Network members to expand programming specifically for middle schools students within their regions. Each of the MPN members has partnered with local schools and community-based organizations to put in place evidence-based substance use prevention curriculums and programming. In the 2022/23, MPN partners connected with over 60 schools and after school programs for middle school students. MPN partners have also worked directly with health teachers at middle schools to strengthen existing efforts to promote the overall mental health and well-being of students. MPN partners are expanding their outreach to additional schools and youth services organizations for the current school year.



Supporting the Expansion of Community Schools

In 2023, the Office of School and Student Supports at DOE provided grant funding and technical assistance to three School Administrative Units to support them to become community schools. With federal funding, OSSS was able to bring on a dedicated staff person to provide direct support to these three grantees as well as staff at other schools interested in implementing key components of community schools. The purpose of community schools is to meet the needs of students and families by leveraging local and state resources and creating partnerships with community-based organizations to coordinate and integrate education, developmental, family, health, and other comprehensive services. These three SAUs implemented programming to connect students and families to comprehensive services within the school and community. These services included increased mental health supports, access to legal services, after school academic and enrichment support, increased support to address food insecurity and expanded dental services. Two schools hired new Community School Coordinators who are responsible for making connections for the school and families to community-based organizations and linking families to needed services and resources.

In early 2024, the team at the Office of School and Student Supports has reopened grant opportunities and technical assistance to a new round of four SAU awardees. The team will also work with staff across state agencies and with external stakeholders to continue to identify opportunities for expanding community schools, including applying for federal grants to support programming in more rural parts of the state.

Investments to Increase School-Based Mental Health Staff and Services

In the spring of 2023, Maine DOE was awarded \$9 million, funded through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, to increase school-based mental health staff and services in Maine over the next 5 years. With this funding, the DOE has established the Expanding Access in School Environments (EASE) Maine which



School Based Health Center

Regional School Unit 1 took advantage of the expansion grants for School Based Health Centers (SBHC) to partner with Lincoln Health to start up a new SBHC at Morse High School in Bath. The health center provides health care services, both medical and behavioral health, on campus. The Nurse Practitioner at the SBHC works closely with the school nurse to coordinate their efforts and avoid duplication of services. Unlike the school nurse, the Nurse Practitioner at the SBHC can conduct well-child visits for students, diagnose and prescribe medicine for illness, support students with medication management and provide reproductive health care for students. Students are also able to access behavioral health services through a licensed social worker who is on Morse's campus two days per week. By providing these services on-site, students are able to have their medical and mental health needs addressed in a timely manner. As a result, they are less likely to miss school for health reasons or to attend medical appointments off campus. The services provided through the health center at Morse provide peace of mind to parents, improve the overall health and well-being of students, and alleviates pressures on primary care physicians in the community who already have full case loads of patients.

will provide grants to nine high-need school administrative units (SAUs) to support efforts to recruit and retain mental health providers and expand services to students.

DOE awarded grants to Eastport Public Schools, Jefferson Public Schools, Lewiston Public Schools, RSU 12, RSU 24, RSU 54, RSU 73, RSU 79, and RSU 85. These SAUs were identified as high need because they had low student to mental health provider ratios relative to the rest of the state and nation. Through the EASE Maine grants, the Maine DOE is partnering with these SAUs to develop and implement whole student-focused strategies to meet the unique needs of each community, increase student access to much-needed mental health services, and recruit, retain, and re-specialize staff to support the mental health and wellbeing of students, staff, and families. The funding will enable SAUs to collaborate with one another and with community organizations, state agencies, and other partners to confront growing mental health needs following the pandemic by increasing the number of highly qualified mental health services providers in schools. In 2023, eight out of nine of these SAUs used the funding to hire at least one mental health provider to serve students in their schools.

Expanding Opportunities for Youth to Participate in Meaningful Paid Work Experience and Career Exploration

The Governor’s Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan (MJRP) included \$25 million in funding for building out career exploration programming for Maine youth. During the first year of the program (school year 2022/2023), the MJRP Career Exploration Program served more than 3,500 students, with almost 3000 of these students



participating in a paid work experience. The purpose of the Career Exploration Program is to support young people to gain a better understanding of career opportunities, build foundational skills and make connections to employers through work-based learning.

With MJRP funding, Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG), a statewide non-profit working in 93 Maine high schools, has implemented the Maine Career Exploration Badge Program for high school juniors and seniors. The program connects students to a 40-hour paid work experience to receive hands on employer engagement experiences. This experience is coupled with online modules and direct support from JMG specialists to help students to learn about career opportunities, set goals, document and reflect upon their employment experiences, and develop plans for their futures.

“This may be a good option for other students who are looking to move forward in their career while gaining school credits and getting certifications early. This program gives you the opportunity to see what options there are in trades, and can help you get a head start in whichever trade you choose.”

—JILLIAN RACKLIFF, STUDENT IN THE ALL TRADES PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM



The Department of Education awarded grants to 23 high schools/Career and Technical Education schools (CTEs) and three community-based organizations in 13 counties to implement or expand Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) programming for youth. ELOs are hands-on, credit-bearing experiences outside of the traditional classroom with an emphasis on community-based career exploration. These grants are focused specifically on connecting juniors and seniors to meaningful paid work experiences through ELO programming. Other components of these ELO programs also include the development of work skills and exposure to careers and career opportunities through job shadowing, career fairs, informational interviews, mentorships and other similar programming. This funding has dramatically expanded the network of ELO professionals across the state and is supporting the creation of hundreds of new workforce partnerships.

The Children’s Cabinet awarded grants to five community-based organizations to provide career exploration programming to historically disadvantaged youth aged 16 to 24 years old, including youth with disabilities, connected to the juvenile justice system, experiencing homelessness, transitioning in or out of the foster care system, with low-income, of color and from indigenous communities. All of these programs are recruiting youth in their communities to participate in job readiness programming, connecting youth to meaningful paid work experiences and ensuring youth have services and supports needed to overcome barriers to employment.

Expanding Participation of Young People in Certified Pre-Apprenticeship and Apprenticeship Programming

The MJRP also includes funding for the Department of Labor to expand pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programming. In 2023, 282 youth between the ages of 16 and 24 participated in either a certified pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship program. High-quality pre-apprenticeship programs provide foundational job and soft-skill training necessary to bridge trainees to successful employment as apprentices. Pre-apprenticeship programs are delivered by a variety of partners, including high schools, adult education providers, community colleges, labor organizations or a community-based organizations. In Maine, 14 educational institutions are participating in pre-apprenticeship programs in partnership with more than 20 employers, employer associations, or labor unions. Eighty percent of all pre-apprentice participants have successfully completed the program and almost 30% of those completing programming entered a certified apprenticeship program. Apprenticeship is a workforce training model that combines on-the-job learning and formal classroom or online instruction to help a worker or young person gain the knowledge, skills and competencies needed for career success.

The pre-apprenticeship program is specifically targeting youth between the ages of 16 to 24 at Career and Technical Education (CTE) schools, high schools, and out-of-school youth in need of a connection to gainful employment leading to financial stability and

“The apprenticeship program has been invaluable, providing me with a career opportunity in the banking industry. I can rise through the ranks and have more work flexibility. I transitioned from the Waterville Kennedy Memorial Drive branch to being a float teller in Bangor, working hours around my class schedule.”

—DAWSON FLETCHER, APPRENTICE WITH CAMDEN NATIONAL BANK AND SOMERSET CAREER & TECHNICAL CENTER



professional success. For example, Associated General Contractors of Maine held four pre-apprenticeship programs over the summer with Bath CTE, Biddeford CTE, Brewer High School, and Gorham Schools to introduce students to employment opportunities and provide on-the-job training within the construction industry. In Summer 2024, AGC will host the Maine Construction Academy pre-apprenticeship programming with students from at least 8 high schools in Summer 2024. IBEW 1253 Augusta Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (JATC) hosted its first cohort of Nokomis high school Multi-Craft Core Curriculum pre-apprentices last year. Four of those graduates were accepted into the Augusta Electrical JATC Electrician apprenticeship program for Fall 2023. They are hosting their second pre-apprentice cohort now, with plans to expand into other schools.

Development and Implementation of a Child Safety and Family Well-being Plan

DHHS leadership and staff are working in partnership with the Maine Child Welfare Action Network to develop and implement a Child Safety and Family Well-Being Plan to keep children safe by keeping families strong.

The Plan serves as a framework for DHHS, other state agencies, and community partners to build upon. It is informed by research and feedback from community partners, parents, caregivers, and youth. More than 400 people have provided input into what's working well within the array of supports and services to strengthen families and what can be improved.

Version 1.0 of this Plan was released in the spring of 2023, establishing a shared responsibility for strengthening families and identifying opportunities for immediate

action to develop a Child and Family Well-Being System in Maine. The Plan will be modified and expanded with continued input from state and community partners, parents, youth, and other stakeholders in 2024 and beyond.

Version 1.0 identified five strategies:

- Develop, implement, and update the Plan in partnership with families, state agency partners, and communities;
- Promote supportive communities where children, youth, and families feel comfortable seeking help;
- Improve the economic security of parents and caregivers to provide safety and stability for their children;
- Provide services and resources to help parents and caregivers ensure the safety, health, and nurturing care of their children; and
- Improve coordination of supports and services for children, youth, and families.

Version 1.0 called for concrete, short-run actions in alignment with these strategies, such as helping communities establish flexible funds for families to be used for basic needs, improving mandated reporter training to ensure community members understand supports for families, building community capacity to prevent substance use and mental health disorders, and developing metrics and reporting guidelines to track the performance of the Plan.

DHHS is currently working to implement key initiatives with the \$1 million appropriated in the budget. These include a campaign and website to normalize challenges and support parents asking for help and funding to strengthen community networks around the spaces that families access to find support locally.

Endnotes

¹The State of Maine Needs Assessment: Vulnerable Children Birth to Age 5 and Their Families, RMC Research, October 2020, <https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/earlychildhood/prekexpansiongrant>

CONCLUSION

The Children's Cabinet will continue to focus on ways to strengthen programs and policies for children and youth by continuing and increasing collaboration and coordination across agencies and the engagement of parents, youth, and key stakeholders. The Children's Cabinet plans and initiatives in 2024 will build off the learnings and the successes of their work in previous years.



CHILDREN'S CABINET PLAN FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Goal: All Maine Children Enter Kindergarten Prepared to Succeed

The Children's Cabinet will implement key strategies to promote the healthy development of all young children in Maine and ensure that all children grow up in healthy, safe and supportive environments. The Cabinet will strive to engage the voice of parents and caregivers in a culturally and linguistically accessible way as we further develop and implement our strategies.

Areas of Focus

The Children's Cabinet will implement strategies that will:

1. Increase access to affordable early care & education, preventive and early intervention services for young children and their families.
2. Raise the quality of our early care and education system and support families to access quality programming.
3. Recruit, prepare and retain a diverse early childhood workforce.

Short term strategies: 2024

- Provide infrastructure grants to existing or new child care programs to create new slots, particularly in underserved areas.
- Continue to offer weekly stipends of \$100 to infant caregivers receiving CCSP to recognize the high cost of providing infant care and increase the quality bump to child care programs on the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) serving infants and toddlers.
- Provide scholarships to help students with low and moderate income attain associates and bachelor's degrees in early childhood education.



- Implement the early childhood mental health consultation statewide to help parents and educators support the social and emotional development of young children, particularly children with special needs.
- Implement a tiered child care salary supplement program to increase wages for early childhood educators and recognize experience.
- Continue strengthening the Perinatal System of Care infrastructure (preconception to 1 year post-partum) including family leadership, parental engagement, and diverse representation.
- Develop and conduct a field test of a valid and reliable Kindergarten Entry Inventory to help educators and policymakers assess children's progress along developmental progressions to inform instruction in the kindergarten year and policymaking.

Long-term strategies: 2024 – 2027

Intermediate strategies: 2024 – 2025

- Provide grants to child care programs to improve quality and rating on the QRIS. (updated)
- Expand professional learning opportunities that support inclusive and trauma informed practices in early care and education settings.
- Offer a professional learning series on early childhood education to school administrators, particularly for those with ECE programs.
- Fund start-up infrastructure grants to expand the number public pre-K slots for 4 year olds.
- Provide grant funding to support new public pre-K partnerships between schools and community partners to overcome barriers to expanding public pre-K in certain communities.
- Align quality programming across state child care assistance programs.
- Implement key models such as First 10 Schools and Communities and First4ME to provide professional development, tools and supports to improve and strengthen coordination and alignment across the birth through early elementary years in communities to ensure smooth transitions into kindergarten for children and families, quality care and education for young children, and greater access to needed resources for families.
- Build a robust Help Me Grow program to provide a comprehensive, statewide, coordinated system of early identification, referral, and follow-up for children from prenatal care up to 8 years and their families.
- Maintain access to high quality perinatal care in Maine by expanding post-partum coverage to 12 months for pregnant people, building linkages between early intervention and medical systems to better serve diverse and underserved populations, and improving the connection to perinatal consultation by expanding the obstetric telehealth network to all birthing hospitals. (new)
- Support perinatal health by assessing the current capacity of the perinatal workforce in Maine, improving perinatal training and education opportunities for students and current providers, and exploring the use of community healthcare workers to support maternal and child health. (new)
- Ensure access to high-quality perinatal care, including behavioral health, for all pregnant women, pregnant people, and infants in Maine at the appropriate Level of Care (LOC) by improving data collection and case reviews to inform quality improvement and policy and encouraging all birth hospitals to participate in the Perinatal Quality Collaborative for Maine and implement perinatal patient safety bundles.
- Increase access to, expand and strengthen early childhood programming at Career and Technical schools.
- Develop clear opportunities and pathways for individuals interested in entering the field of early care and education to support them to access ECE training and education. (new)
- Increase professional development and coaching opportunities for early childhood educators in center-based, family child care programs and the early elementary years in public schools.
- Establish an Early Childhood Integrated Data System to track progress on early childhood goals and to analyze impact of policy decisions.

CHILDREN'S CABINET PLAN FOR YOUTH

Goal: All Maine Youth Enter Adulthood Healthy, Connected to the Workforce and/or Education

The Children's Cabinet's strategies will promote inclusion and equity and consider the cultural, social, economic and linguistic needs of Maine's diverse population of youth aged 14 to 24 and their families.

Areas of Focus:

The Children's Cabinet will implement strategies that will:

1. Ensure basic needs of youth and their families are met.
2. Increase prevention services and programming in schools and at the community level.
3. Increase access to needed behavioral health, including substance use disorder, screenings and treatment.

Strategies:

Short term strategies: 2024

- Increase trainings in evidence-based practices to behavioral health providers.
- Disseminate a universally accessible and free Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum for all schools & after school programs.
- Support school-based health centers to provide additional hours for mental and behavioral health services to students.
- Fund Maine Youth Action Network to provide restorative practices support, education & technical assistance in schools.
- Increase training and technical assistance for behavioral health organizations on effective screening and identification of suicide prevention for youth living with a substance use disorder.
- Improve and align behavioral health screenings across state agencies to ensure early identification and referral to services.





Intermediate strategies: 2024 – 2025

- Increase access for youth to evidence-based behavioral health services, including prevention and early intervention.
- Increase access to youth substance use disorder treatment in primary care practices and school-based health centers.
- Establish a training program for school support staff members to recognize and mitigate the impact of trauma.
- Align and increase the incorporation of restorative practices and restorative justice across state programs for youth.
- Increase programming to support pregnant and parenting teens.
- Provide more opportunities for youth to participate in meaningful paid work experience.
- Increase awareness of careers, career pathways and access points to post-secondary education and training programs.

Long-term strategies: 2024 – 2027

- Expand housing options across the continuum of care and entire state.
- Ensure eligible youth and young adults are participating in public programs to increase food security and health coverage.
- Strengthen continuum of children’s crisis services.
- Ensure successful and smooth transitions for youth moving from children to adult service systems.
- Ensure systems involved youth can access the services that they need in their communities.



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