Per the Charge from the ERC leadership, the Committee is dividing its work into two phases. Phase 1 will include immediate recommendations around the highest priorities, with an initial deadline of June 5 for an initial check-in, then a deadline of July 15 for the initial report itself. Phase 2 will build on those initial recommendations to focus on broader issues that link education to workforce recovery more broadly, and to the specific sectors outlined in the Economic Strategic Plan specifically.

This document summarizes The Committee’s initial Phase 1 recommendations as of June 5, followed by other issues that the Committee will explore in Phase 2.

INITIAL HIGHEST-PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Open PreK-12 Schools for In-Person Instruction as Scheduled in the Fall

The Committee has heard a unified message from individuals and organizations across Maine: Schools must be open in the fall. Until PreK-12 schools are open, many parents will not be able to return to work, thereby undermining other efforts to reboot the State’s economy. Developing and implementing plans to safely re-open Maine’s schools in the fall should be the State’s top economic redevelopment priority. Leaders from the PreK-12 sector are nearing completion of detailed state-wide guideline to inform the safe reopening of campuses [ELABORATE]. It is beyond the scope of this committee to review and comment on the specific recommendations of those groups, although consultation with the key leadership gives us confidence in the thoroughness of the process that was followed and the thoughtfulness of the recommendations themselves. We urge the State to endorse these guidelines, and for the Department of Education to work with individual schools as they develop their own school-specific reopening plans.

2. Institutions of Higher Education Must be Allowed to Open for In-Person Instruction in the Fall

Maine’s diverse Institutions of Higher Education (IHE’s) include colleges, universities, and vocational training institutes. The State’s IHEs represent a wide variety of institutions, including public and private, small and large, residential and commuter, which offer a range of credentials ranging from microcertificates to doctoral degrees. Maine’s IHE’s are essential to support and grow Maine’s workforce. While providing the skilled workforce for the key growth areas per Maine’s 10-year Economic Strategic Plan, IHE’s encourage Maine people to stay in the state, and are the biggest driver of domestic immigration to Maine. Collectively, Maine’s IHE’s contribute $2.2 billion in annual revenue and $4.5
billion in annual output to the state’s economy. If they are not open in the fall, many students will migrate to other states whose colleges and universities will be open.

Vocational and training centers, both those offered through the community college system and elsewhere, are likewise critical to the state’s economy, and must be allowed to reopen.

Some higher educational functions can be conducted remotely, using various technologies. However, many educational functions, ranging from vocational/technical training (e.g., auto mechanics) to advanced professional training (e.g., surgery), require face-to-face instruction and hands-on experiential learning that simply cannot be delivered online. IHE’s are already developing hybrid blends of remote and face-to-face learning, tailored to each educational institution’s specific circumstances.

The University of Maine System, the Community College System, and the Maine Independent Colleges and Universities Association have joined to work collectively on a framework document that provides guidelines for the safe reopening of IHE’s. The document was informed by federal and state CDC guidelines, as well as scientists at the IHE’s themselves, and has broad consensus across the higher education sector. The Committee urges the State to endorse these guidelines.

3. Prioritize Key Needs Across the Education Sector for Federal and State Support

A. Schools and IHE’s should be prioritized for in resources to support viral testing, including contract tracing and surveillance testing.

B. IHE’s, that are scheduled to bring students back to campus in mid- to late-August, will require revisiting the 14-day quarantine requirement for students coming from out-of-state, assuming it remains in effect at that time. Alternatives to the quarantine, such as testing students just before or just after they arrive from out-of-state, must be explored.

C. Educational institutions have incurred, and will incur further, unanticipated costs to adapt to the pandemic. The costs for each of the State’s public and private colleges and universities range from a few million to tens of millions of dollars, with a collective estimate of $75 million for the sector in FY 20. Additional expenditures will be incurred to prepare for a safe reopening in the fall. Pre-K-12 schools like similarly face additional, unbudgeted expenses to prepare for a safe re-opening in the fall. The Committee Recommend State support to offset these unanticipated expenses, for example through prioritized allocation of Maine’s CARES Act funds, in order to address urgent needs in the preK-12 schools (e.g., transportation), and to keep Maine’s IHE’s viable and nationally competitive.

D. The Committee may recommend legislation or other efforts to provide legal immunity to school districts and IHE’s who follow in good faith State-approved guidelines for reopening.

E. Some leaders in both primary and higher education have voiced concern that any viral outbreak on campus might lead to an overreaction by the State CDC, resulting in unnecessary closure of the campus. This concern could lead inadvertently to a reluctance to promote widespread surveillance testing (assuming it becomes available). The Committee recommends that the State CDC commits to a partnership to work with schools and IHE’s to develop plans to manage
outbreaks that might occur while encouraging operations to continue to the fullest extent possible. [IS THIS TOO PROVOCATIVE? LEAVE IN?]

4. Develop a User-Friendly Guide to Post-Secondary Educational Programs throughout the State

In addition to traditional higher education, Maine has many career-oriented training programs, including those using fully online, fully face-to-face, and hybrid instructional models. The State’s diverse educational institutions collectively offer programs leading to credentials ranging from microcertificates to doctoral degrees. However, there does not exist a single resource that includes all postsecondary educational opportunities in the state. Development of this guide is a high priority, both to connect displaced Maine workers to educational opportunities, but also to help attract immigrants (both domestic and foreign) to Maine. The Committee is already working on the development of such a guide.

ISSUES TO BE EXPLORED FURTHER IN PHASE 2

1. Increase Accessibility of Educational Opportunities

   • Many Maine people already face a range of financial and personal obstacles to pursuing education/training
   • The Committee may recommend expanding the Maine State Grant Program, Opportunity Maine Tax Credit, and through our Congressional delegation, may advocate for increases in the Federal Pell Grant program and similar programs to support educational access

2. Address Uneven Infrastructure Supporting Online/Remote Work Opportunities

   • The transition to remote education and work has highlighted and exacerbated existing gaps in our Internet infrastructure
   • This limits us in an emergency transition and will limit us as more and more industry/education institutions incorporate online/remote work into their normal business models
   • The Committee can consider advocating for efforts to expand reliable broadband access across the state

3. Address Workforce and Education Support Programs/Services that are Already Taxed

   • Prior to COVID there was unmet demand for services like career preparation, health care, education financing (tuition and debt), food security, childcare, etc.
   • COVID has exacerbated an already stretched field of support services – it will become more difficult for many to pursue education and workforce training

4. Address Disproportionate Impact of the Pandemic on Marginalized Groups

   • The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequities across groups, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups, such as racial minorities and recent immigrants

5. Address Fragility of Care Workforce
• Frontline direct care workers are in short supply, sometimes poorly paid, and can be in dangerous health situations without much protection

6. Address the Obstacles to Work Already Faced by Immigrants, and their Exacerbation by the Pandemic
• Access to professional credentials
• Transition supports

Other Issues to Consider
• DOL and IHE partnership to assess workforce needs and identify strategies (short-term and long-term)
• Support public support programs that support workers and workforce development (health care, food security, education and training, childcare)
• Support expansion of online education programs/infrastructure/devices
• Make childcare options affordable and available (particularly if schools remain closed)
• Paid Leave policies
• Supports for immigrants’ transition to work

Data/Information Needs:
• Guidelines prepared by the PreK-12 group and the Higher Education group
• Pre- and post COVID business health (openings, closing, etc.) – state of the economy
• Pre- and post-COVID labor/workforce statistics by industry
• Education reopening costs
• Care industry statistics
• Childcare supply and costs
• Immigrant workforce statistics and supporting info
• Underlying health data related to COVID
• Testing and surveillance logistics and costs
• Internet infrastructure statistics/gaps/needs
• Federal stimulus dollars/programs/resources
• Data on problems with cross-state licensing reciprocity for professionals

Priority Experts Needed for Input:
• Representatives from PreK-12 leadership/associations (e.g., Jason Judd at Educate Maine)
• Representatives from the joint working group from the University of Maine system and the Maine Independent Colleges Association (e.g., Kimberly Whitehead and Jim Dlugos)
• Maine DOE
• Maine DOL (?)
• Maine DECD (Denis Garland)
• Legal Community
• Labor Economists (Ryan Wallace at USM, John Dorrer, Boston Fed)
• Regional Economists (Boston Fed, Amanda Rector)
• Immigrant Community Advocates (Beth Stickney)
• UMS and Community College System
• Independent IHE
• Labor (representative groups)
• Employers (representative groups)
• Workforce Boards (state and local)