

The Governor's Task Force To Engage Maine's Youth

Findings and Recommendations
June 2007

LOSING SIGHT

I SIT ALONE
WITH NO ONE ELSE
AND TRY TO GET THINGS DONE
BUT I LIE DEFEATED
TEARS STREAMING DOWN
AS I THINK OF HOW THEY WON
TRYING TO GRADUATE
TRYING TO PLEASE THEM
BECOMES THIS OBSESSION I CAN'T ACHIEVE
I'M LOSING THIS RACE
FAILING THE BOOKS
LOSING SIGHT OF THE REAL ME
I'M A DISAPPOINTMENT
I HAVE TO GRADUATE
BUT EVERY CORNER TURNED
IS ANOTHER PERSON THAT WILL HATE
THEY SAY I'M NOT WORTH ANYTHING
SAY I'LL NEVER MAKE IT THROUGH
BUT IF I'M GOING TO DO IT
I'LL NEED HELP FROM YOU

MANDI, YOUTH MEMBER OF THE TASK FORCE

I had a close friend of mine that dropped out because he said that school just “wasn’t for him.” He dropped out halfway through his senior year. After spending a year out of school, he realized that his decision was not for the best. He had difficulty finding work due to the lack of a diploma and/or GED. He decided to re-enroll and graduated this past year. He now has a job, a car, and a solid start on life.

Education is one of the most important stepping stones on the path to adulthood, and, an apparent necessity in this modern world we live in.

James, Youth Member of the Task Force

In Maine we are especially proud of our strong and long-standing commitment to our children, excellent schools, quality health care and safe communities. Despite these assets, many youth in our state face numerous challenges and barriers to achieving successful participation in school, community and work. Far too many Maine youth have become disenfranchised and disengaged from school and are not engaged in work, as James has so eloquently shared.

Governor Baldacci believes that we cannot afford to neglect supporting high aspirations and successful transitions to adulthood for even one youth: **they are our future**. Collectively, we have come to understand how critical it is to integrate and redirect our resources and energy to assure that each and every Maine young adult has the supports he or she requires to be a contributing and productive member of our communities. The state’s economic future is dependent upon our youth. We must be committed to building on the investment that our schools, state agencies and communities have made in our youth to achieve high standards. We must refuse to relegate any Maine citizen to a life of limited opportunity.

In June 2006 Governor Baldacci established a Governor’s Task Force to investigate and report back on the issues related to Maine youth who are not engaged, or who are at risk of disengaging from school or work. The Governor’s charge was to review state and national research and data on the challenges and solutions and to create, by June 30, 2007, a collaborative plan identifying strategies to engage Maine’s disengaged youth in school and work. Specifically, the Task Force was asked to provide specific long- and short-term strategies, policies, and/or legislation that will result in supporting active youth engagement in their communities, school and or work.

The Task Force included as members a number of youth affected by the issues at hand. Their insight, experience and passion for positive change were invaluable to the work. Additionally, all the youth-serving agencies were represented as were parents, advocates, educators and representatives of organizations providing service to youth.

Questions that guided the work of the Task Force included:

- Who are these youth?
- Why are youth becoming disengaged from school and/or work?
- What are current strategies?
- How do community and state resources connect with schools?
- How do we prevent youth from disengaging, intervene when they are at risk and re-engage youth when they have left school and work?

The Charge

Our work was daunting and the challenges facing youth numerous. We heard directly from youth and families about having to redo a whole year of school due to lost transcripts; no one from school following up when they stopped attending; and a lack of understanding about the implications of disruptions when youth are hospitalized for psychiatric issues or detained by corrections. We heard from educators regarding the challenges in understanding and “crediting” a student’s previous academic work; delays in getting student records transferred; and a lack of professional development to build capacity to address the needs of students in the classroom. School administrators shared their difficulty in placing students from school unions without a high school and the reluctance to issue diplomas to students for whom they were unable to adequately interpret a transcript. We learned from state agencies about the challenges facing foster youth who were involved with multiple systems when those involved worked in isolation rather than collaboratively.

Task Force members concluded that disengagement results from a variety of conditions that often are not within the youth’s control. They include the issues related to high mobility as often experienced by youth in the foster care system, youth with psychiatric illness, youth who are homeless, youth who live in poverty and youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

The Task Force recommendations provided below are designed to address the challenges of Maine’s youth who are at risk of disengaging or have disengaged from school and/or work.

RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Let me tell you a secret: right now you are all sitting on the ground floor of the greatest place on earth, and the elevator doors are open. We’ve got job and career opportunities second to none.... This is a good place. Good to live in, good to work in, good to raise a family in.

Stephen King, UMaine Commencement, May 5, 2005

According to Governor Baldacci, "Investing in our children and their education is a key component to maintaining our 'gold standard' workforce" (2006). The findings of our research and investigation over the course of the year identified significant challenges that will require Maine to collectively and collaboratively respond to youth at risk of becoming disengaged or all ready disengaged from school or work: the elevator doors are not yet open to all Maine youth.

In a paper delivered to the National Conference of State Legislators, Steve Christian (2003) reminds us that a quality education builds on a foundation of educational continuity and school stability. Thousands of Maine children and youth experience educational disruptions, and each change frequently results in a change in school placement. Every school change has a significant impact on students’ education as they must adapt to different curricula, different expectations, new friends and new teachers. A stable and high-quality school environment provides youth with opportunities to develop positive relationships with supportive and caring teachers, with school counselors, and classmates, and to continue with their academic progress.

Engage Youth

Maine does have reason to believe in the strength of our community and state. In our year-long journey together the Task Force discovered many valuable resources and opportunities currently available for our youth. A few examples include schools that have developed a data system that Student Assistance Teams use to monitor and program for youth at risk. There is a statewide initiative that links school districts, state agencies, psychiatric facilities and correctional facilities. State agencies have supported pilots, such as Wraparound Maine designed to provide an integrated planning approach for youth with complex needs. Communities for Children programs, based on the developmental assets model building on the strengths of youth, have demonstrated success. Teen programs that are youth-driven, developed and guided by youth have successfully kept youth engaged in school and work as modeled by the Capital Kids program in Augusta. Parent-run organizations, such as the Maine Parent Federation support families. Jobs for Maine's Graduates (JMG) incorporates workforce development in schools by working with educators and businesses to keep youth engaged. Career Centers assist youth to identify and obtain training and jobs. The Re-Entry Network enlists support from the community to successfully integrate young adults from prison back into the community.

These are some examples of the valuable resources and opportunities available for youth...in *some* parts of our state and for *some* youth. Unfortunately, they are not equitably distributed across the state and gaps in services and support exist in most regions of the state. Resources, such as the examples offered, would serve to mitigate the challenges and barriers identified by the Task Force if they were more accessible across the state. Maine must have a comprehensive, integrated approach to build on the commitment and strength of our communities to create opportunities and safety nets for our youth. We must better understand what works and why, to best allocate our limited resources effectively.

What We Learned

My situation is not unique of other youth in foster care. Youth in care often enter high school lagging behind their peers for a variety of reasons, and then fall behind in the credits they need for graduation. Interruptions in our education often result in academic skills that are below our classmates. It's easy for us to become frustrated and so discouraged that we end up dropping out of high school. A good education is especially critical for me because I have fewer resources than other children whose families are available for support. I see my education as the tool that can allow me to become the adult I want to be.

Mariah, Youth Member of the Task Force

The Task Force's research and investigation over the course of the year identified significant challenges that will require Maine to begin to collectively and collaboratively respond to these youth in crisis.

Results

National statistics paint a disturbing picture for youth in our country:

- Nearly one-third of all students drop out of high school (*Silent Epidemic*).
- Frequent school changes have been correlated with lower academic achievement (Popp, 2004).
- In 2004, 15% to 18% of school-aged children changed residence from the previous year.
- Sixth grade students who had changed schools four or more times had lost approximately one year of academic growth according to a University of Chicago study (Kerbow, 1996).
- High school students who changed schools even once were less than half as likely to graduate, even when controlling for other variables that affect high school completion, according to a University of California study (Rumberger & Larsen, 1999).

In Maine we have significant reason to be concerned:

- In 2004 Maine experienced a 75% increase in the number of teens, ages 16 to 19, who were not in school or working, pushing the share of idle teens to 4,527 or 7% of youth (Maine Children's Alliance).
- As of January, 2006, 2255 children were in the care and custody of DHHS.
- Of the 1,048 youth that entered care since 10/1/04 and were still in care as of 11/1/06,
 - 38% (399) youth have had 1 placement,
 - 28.5% (300) have had 2 placements,
 - 17% (179) have had 3 placements, and
 - 16.1% (170) have had 4 or more placements in that 2 year period.
- 1,141 youth were reported as homeless by DOE (2006).
- In 2005 there were 417 committals to juvenile correctional facilities and 1,870 children and youth were detained (Maine DOC).
- School administrators report that 35% to 45% of their students are "at risk" (JMG, 2006).

While integration among agencies and services is articulated in the legislation that emerged from our work (see accompanying text box), there is an inconsistent use of integrated team approaches to support Maine youth at risk of disengaging. Furthermore, for these youth, there is inequitable access to a broad array of educational and social service options across the state. A particularly vexing issue is the transition from youth to adult services. We need to build on existing successful programs to reach all youth.

Integration

Robert Balfanz (2007) has identified three essential things that states must do to respond to this crisis.

Applying these to Maine suggests that we must:

1. Understand the issue of disengaged youth and the resources currently devoted to ending the problem;
2. Develop a strategic prevention, intervention, and re-engagement plan that focuses community resources, efforts and reforms at the key points where and when students fall off the path to high school graduation; and
3. Gather the human and financial resources needed for a comprehensive and sustained campaign, and develop the evaluation, accountability, and continuous improvement mechanisms needed to maintain it.

Therefore, our recommendations, strategies and actions are designed to:

1. Identify these youth;
2. Understand the full array of programs and statutes and regulations that affect them and which exist to support them;
3. Eliminate barriers that prevent access to a spectrum of learning opportunities;
4. Provide timely access to youth-driven and family-centered strengths, based support services to youth in need;
5. Increase capacity to integrate services and funding to more effectively meet the needs of youth at risk; and,
6. Establish and disseminate an annual multi-agency report to the Governor to ensure accountability and a mechanism for continuous improvement.

Public Law 451

An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Task Force To Engage Maine's Youth in Successful School Completion

This legislation will implement the recommendations of the Governor's Task Force to Engage Maine's Youth by developing a process whereby students experiencing educational disruption will have the same opportunity as all Maine students to earn an approved high school diploma.

Its primary purpose is to meet the needs of students experiencing educational disruption by establishing a process to recognize their academic work while creating manageable procedures for school personnel and other officials that are involved with these students.

Key Components of the Legislation:

- Commitment to students: School Work Recognition Plans for those whose education has been disrupted
- Credit for work completed: Academic materials shared or an academic programming waiver signed between sending and receiving schools/placements
- Timely access and enrollment: School records transferred within 5 school days
- State Review Team: A team designated to address disputes
- New Diploma Option: Department of Education Diploma as designated by Commissioner of Education

Findings & Recommendations

Finding # 1: Maine has a limited capacity to identify, track and analyze youth at risk because data collection is based on separate mandates and data systems are not integrated across departments.

Incomplete and/or inaccurate data collection and analysis, along with the isolated, fragmented or uncoordinated approaches to keeping all Maine students engaged in education pose considerable challenges. Only by more accurately identifying Maine's disengaged or at risk of disengaging youth populations and the most effective approaches to this growing epidemic, can we respond effectively. The Task Force believes it is imperative that an expectation is established that each youth-serving agency knows the educational and employment status of each youth it serves. Concurrently, Maine must develop collaborative and comprehensive policies and programs to assure engagement by all youth in their education and communities, interventions for when students become at risk of disengaging or dropping out and strategies to re-engage youth who have disengaged from their education must be supported as well.

Recommendation # 1

Increase capacity to identify, track and analyze the status of youth to inform decision making, allocate resources and assure accountability to Maine's youth and families.

Strategy 1: Increase capacity to identify, track and analyze the status of youth at risk.

Recommended Actions:

- Identify common indicators across state agency departments serving youth that identify youth at risk to trigger collaborative action leading to coordinated policy and program implementation.
- Track the educational and vocational status of youth at risk served by the Departments of Health & Human Services, Labor, Education and Corrections so each agency can analyze and use that data to inform decisions regarding policy, practice and programs. Criteria include educational and/or vocational status of youth, grade completion and days missed from school due to state agency involved changes in residential placement.
- Identify youth who no longer attend school or adult education through school attendance coordinators, student assistance teams, dropout prevention committees, school counselors, social workers and school nurses.
- Create a mechanism to track educational status of youth between school districts and adult education programs.
- Use School Dropout Prevention plans to identify statewide trends and successful practices and policy recommendations.
- Adopt a statewide high school senior survey and follow-up to ascertain the post-school outcomes of all students.

Finding # 2: Currently there are inequitable access and opportunities to a spectrum of learning and service options based on individual needs of youth at risk of disengaging or who have disengaged from school and/or work.

There can be no dispute that a quality education is critical to the future of our youth and our state. Yet for many, traditional education programs are not responsive. While many youth thrive in a traditional setting, others benefit from hands-on contextualized learning or experiential education that demonstrates the relevance of classroom learning to their present lives and future careers. Connecting youth to a range of options within and outside of the school setting can re-engage youth to finish their high school education. Critical elements of a quality education include high expectations, access to caring adults, relevance and a variety of opportunities (including career and technical education and alternative education). Youth and family members noted the critical importance of opportunities, such as flexible schedules, tutoring, summer school, parenting teen support, after school programs and internships.

Recommendation # 2

Provide equitable access to a spectrum of high quality learning and service opportunities utilizing a youth-driven, family-centered, approach to policy development, services and supports.

Strategy 2.a: Ensure that all youth have equitable access to a spectrum of high quality learning and service opportunities throughout the State of Maine.

Recommended Actions:

- Ascertain the status and availability statewide of a spectrum of learning and service options for youth including alternative education programs available for all students, and develop a work plan to make services more available and equitable.
- Initiate a work group to develop and implement a plan that will address availability and access to workforce and career development, internship and apprenticeship activities in schools and communities throughout the State.
- Collaborate with career and technical education staff at DOE and locally to address waiting lists that limit access to career and technical education opportunities for all high school students in grades 9-12.
- Promote and utilize the use of personalized learning plans beginning in elementary school as described in *Promising Futures*. Districts can use this data to inform future educational and career and technical education programming that will accommodate the needs of the youth in their district.
- Identify and disseminate promising practices that allow for students to earn credit for work completed outside the traditional school setting, including practices and policies that will support a flexible school day and year.

- Align and coordinate workforce initiatives across the Departments of Labor, Education and Economic and Community Development, so opportunities are equitably available across the state, as recommended by the Maine Jobs Council Youth Transition Committee.
- Assess the availability of mentoring programs for youth at risk across the state to determine gaps and opportunities.

Strategy 2.b: Increase opportunities for integrated professional development so that staff who work with youth learn collaboratively.

Recommended Actions:

- Develop a comprehensive plan to provide integrated professional development so that youth, families and staff working in agencies and schools can understand policies, statutes and mandates that impact youth, including youth with disabilities.
- Disseminate state-wide current information regarding innovative and promising practices that support successful outcomes for youth.
- Provide professional development on creating positive climates in school and community throughout the state consistent with the Bullying and Harassment Prevention curriculum.
- Provide professional development on strengths-based approaches and asset-development for all professionals working with young people.

Strategy 2.c: Increase authentic opportunities for youth and family to be actively involved in policy development, services and supports.

Recommended Actions:

- Include youth and families affected by the issues of disengagement and those at risk for such on existing advisory committees, providing authentic policy development, planning for community resources, and professional development responsive to their needs.

Finding #3: Regulations, statutes, policies, organizational structures, categorical services and funding streams often create barriers for effective and efficient utilization of integrated team approaches to support youth and families.

Individual agencies, schools and communities have engaged in efforts to engage youth in the community. The systemic approach has frequently been fragmented with groups working in isolation. The challenges we face are not only interrelated but share common roots that lie in the community. The responsibility, therefore, in addressing these problems falls to the community as a whole and not only to a few institutions of the community, such as the family and the school (Benard, 2002, p 9).

Recommendation #3

Collaborate to develop a process so agencies can cross-reference outcomes of policies and services for implementation, efficiency, and reduction of cross-purpose programming.

Strategy 3: Create policies and practices that increase a collaborative and seamless delivery system including blended and braided funding options.

Recommended Actions:

- Collaboratively develop a process so agencies can cross-reference outcomes of policies and services for implementation, efficiency, and reduction of cross-purpose programming.
- Establish a public database of rules governing access and eligibility for services and supports addressing youth at risk.
- Develop legislation to create statutory language for DHHS Division of Licensing and Regulatory Services to require contact between psychiatric clinical hospital staff and the youth's educational program after acquiring guardian permission.
- Provide greater flexibility in eligibility and licensing criteria facilitating responsive transition services for youth 15-24 years of age.

Finding #4: Many Maine students are not graduating from high school with diplomas due to disruptions in their educational programs because of homelessness, psychiatric hospitalization, foster care placement, unplanned hospitalization and youth development center placement.

The number of children and youth who experience disruption in their educational programs is increasing. Disruption can occur for multiple reasons and can range from a few days to multiple weeks or months. However, the effect is the same: a student loses valuable instructional time, is disengaged from school and connections are broken. According to a 2003 report on Highly Mobile Students, it takes four to six months for highly mobile students to recover academically from a transfer. In addition, some students were not entering school due to lost records. The Task Force submitted legislation that was enacted this spring to address these issues. The primary purpose of the bill was to meet the needs of students experiencing education disruption by establishing a process to recognize their academic work while creating manageable procedures for school personnel and other officials involved with these students. The successful implementation of the legislation can be maintained through oversight of a workgroup.

Recommendation #4

Implement and evaluate “An act to implement the recommendations of the task force to engage Maine’s youth regarding successful school completion” during the 2007-08 school year.

Strategy 4: Maintain a work group to provide guidance to the implementation and effectiveness of the legislation.

Recommended Actions:

- Create templates for the school work recognition plan and the academic waiver for School Administrative Units.
- Develop criteria for assigning credits and recognition of school work in various educational settings.
- Establish criteria for the statewide review team process and dispute process between individuals and schools, to form the basis for recommendation of a Maine Department of Education diploma.
- Provide regional professional development opportunities for staff across agencies to understand and be able to utilize school work recognition plans, academic waivers, 5-day transmittal of records, the statewide review team and the Maine Department of Education diploma. Establish baseline data for number of youth served and efficacy of process.

Put into action!

Finding #5: There is no single source of data on youth who are at-risk or have disengaged from school and/or work.

Incomplete and/or inaccurate data collection and analysis, along with the isolated, fragmented or uncoordinated approaches to keeping all Maine students engaged in education, pose considerable challenges to resolving these issues. At this time there are no systems in place that allow the sharing of specific youth information among agencies. Several agencies may have the same youth engaged with their services but there is no coordination or collaboration of these services to support the youth in a focused and comprehensive manner. There are no common identifiers for youth across departments that would allow such collaboration and there are no common databases shared or collectively analyzed across departments to inform practice and measure efficacy. More accurately identifying who is included in Maine's disengaged or at risk of disengaging youth populations, and the most effective approaches to respond to this growing epidemic, are imperative.

Recommendation #5

Prepare and disseminate an annual, cross-departmental report to the Governor citing the status of the action steps contained in this report and their impact on policy and program changes to better address the needs of these youth.

Strategy 5: Institute a multi-agency annual report to the governor.

Recommended Actions:

- Update on status of recommended actions and impact on existing and future policies and programs.
- Report will be developed and discussed at the Children's Cabinet and submitted to the Governor by the Commissioners.
- Report due to the Governor annually in December.

We believe these recommendations, strategies and proposed actions will promote cross-departmental efforts on behalf of enhanced outcomes and valued lives for *all* Maine youth. Our youth are Maine's future leaders and the backbone of our economy; only by assuring the supports necessary to achieve positive outcomes on behalf of these youth will we assure that Maine has a vibrant economic future responsive to the needs of all in communities across our state where the elevator doors are open and welcoming to the diversity of our citizens.

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