



Executive Summary

June 2007

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 IN TECHNOLOGY, EDUCATION, RECREATION, AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES, SCIENCE, AND LAND-USE MANAGEMENT. THIS IS THE GOOD PLACE. GOOD TO LIVE IN, GOOD TO WORK IN, GOOD TO RAISE A FAMILY IN.

~STEPHEN KING, UMAINE COMMENCEMENT, MAY 5, 2005



As one of our most famous residents reminds us, Maine is one of the greatest places on the earth. 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 and unfortunately the elevator doors, to which Stephen King so eloquently refers, are not currently open to all our youth. Far too many Maine youth have become disenfranchised and disengaged from school and are not engaged in work. 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 must integrate and re-direct our resources and energy to assure that each and every Maine young adult has the supports he or she requires to be contributing and productive members of our communities. The state's economic future is dependent upon our youth, and we must be committed to building on the investment that our schools, state agencies and communities have made in our youth to achieve to high standards and refuse to relegate any Maine citizen to a life of limited opportunity.

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 or disengaged from school or work. Christian (2003) reminds us that a quality education builds on a foundation of educational continuity and school stability. Unfortunately, too many Maine children and youth experience multiple educational disruptions (as in foster placements) and each change frequently results in a change in school placement. Every school change has a

significant impact on a student's education as they must adapt to different curricula, different expectations, new friends, and new teachers. A stable and high quality school environment provides children with opportunities to develop positive relationships with supportive and caring teachers, school counselors, and classmates, and to continue with their academic progress. For youth who are disengaged or highly mobile remaining engaged in school socially and academically becomes increasingly difficult especially when such exacerbating circumstances as psychiatric illness, homeless or juvenile detention are factored in.

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 disengaged from school and 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 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 was invaluable to our work and we greatly appreciate their participation. Additionally, all the child-serving agencies were represented, as were parents, advocates, educators and representatives of organizations providing service to youth.

Absent intervention, Maine youth who experience educational disruption have a challenging future ahead of them and are far less likely to realize a productive and self-fulfilling life. The recommendations in this report are designed to address the challenges of Maine's youth who have experienced

educational disruption and/or are not engaged or who are at risk of disengaging from school or work.

At minimum we must be able 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; and,
4. Provide timely access to youth-driven and family-centered support services to youth in need.

In our year long journey together we discovered many valuable resources and opportunities currently available for our youth. However, too often they are not equitably distributed across the state and gaps in services and supports exist. Many of these resources would serve to mitigate the challenges and barriers we have identified if they were more accessible across the state. In the Task Force Report we have highlighted a number of programs and strategies that we believe 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 positive outcomes on behalf of these youth will we assure that Maine has a vibrant economic future and integrated communities.

FINDINGS



A summary of the findings and recommendations that comprise the report of our study by the fifty-member task force representing the wide range of stakeholders is provided below.

The findings of our 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.

- According to The Maine Kid's Count (2007) seven percent or 4,527 youth ages 16 – 19 are neither attending school nor working.
- As of January 2006, 2255 children were in care and custody of the State.
- 1,084 children entered care in October 2004 and remained in care as of November 2006. As of November 2006, 37.9% (399) of these children had one placement, 28.5% (300) have had 2 placements, and 33.1% (349) have had 3 or more placements (DHHS, 2006).
- Additionally, the DOE (2006) reported that 1,141 youth were identified as homeless by their school districts during the 2005-06 school year.

Such unacceptable disruptions require coordinated care and support that requires the collaboration and integration of services across multiple departments. Given there is a very limited capacity to track the status of youth currently as well as minimal data sharing between agencies/entities we face multiple challenges to creating a coordinated state response. Additionally, too many of the programs in place lack accountability to determine efficacy and there is a lack of connection among employers, post-secondary institutions, state and private agencies, and schools. While integration among agencies and services is articulated in many legislative, statutory and regulatory policies governing programs, we found that there is an inconsistent use of integrated team approaches to support Maine youth at risk of disengaging. Furthermore, the inequitable access to a broad array of educational and social service options for youth across the state puts them at significant disadvantage. A particularly vexing issue is the transition from child to adult services across the state.

Incomplete and/or inaccurate data collection and analysis, along with the isolated, fragmented or uncoordinated approaches to keeping all Maine

LD 1860

As Amended by Amendment H-474

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. It's 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: Establishment of a Department of Education Diploma as designated by Commissioner of Education

Maine students engaged in education certainly pose considerable challenges to resolving these issues. More accurately identifying of 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. It is clear that Maine needs to develop a collaborative and comprehensive research-based process to engage all youth in their education and communities, to intervene when students become at risk of disengaging or dropping out, and to re-engage youth who have prematurely disengaged from their education.

We have applied Belfanz' (2007) three essential state actions to our findings and have used them to frame our recommendations: Belfanz suggests that we:

1. Must truly understand the issue of disengaged youth and the resources currently devoted to ending the problem;
2. Need to 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. Needs to 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. (pg. 1).

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.

~A youth member of the Task Force

RECOMMENDATIONS



Based upon our findings, the research we reviewed and the collective wisdom of the Task Force members and staff we make the following recommendations for consideration:

① Maine's child serving agencies must address their limited capacity to identify and track youth who are at risk for disengagement and/or those who are disengaged by integrating data systems across departments. Such data is necessary to inform decision making, allocate resources and assure accountability to Maine's youth and families.

② Maine's child serving agencies, communities, and schools must collectively respond to the needs of these youth at risk through collaborative action utilizing a youth-driven, family-centered approach to policy development, services, and supports.

③ Maine's child serving agencies, communities, and schools must fully collaborate to integrate their services and funding to effectively utilize staff supports and services to more efficiently and effectively meet the needs of youth at risk.

④ Maine's child serving agencies must report annually to the Governor on the status of Maine youth at risk as well as on the status of the action steps outlined in the Task Force Report and their impact on policy and program changes to better address the needs of these youth.

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