

2020 MAINE CHILDREN'S CABINET REPORT



GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF
Policy Innovation and the Future



“There is no higher priority than our children and. . .it is high time we put children’s health and safety first. I will start with one simple step — calling together the Children’s Cabinet for the first time in years, to tackle these issues.”

**—Governor Janet T. Mills,
Inaugural Address**

FROM GOVERNOR JANET T. MILLS

“I hope COVID-19 doesn’t affect our hearts being isolated from one another.”

In a letter to me, eleven-year old Savanna reflected what many children have thought throughout the Coronavirus pandemic. Told to stay home, to wear a mask, to keep their distance and to attend school by computer, many children have been isolated and disconnected. But they also learned that being apart in order to protect the public health doesn’t mean we can’t care for each other and love each other just as much as when we are physically together.

Like Savanna, I am concerned about what the pandemic may do to our hearts, especially those of our children. But, like Savanna, I also have hope – hope in the face of adversity, hope in the face of hardship, hope and an unflinching belief in Maine people.

This, in sum, is the fundamental mission of the Children’s Cabinet: giving children and families hope, tackling our challenges and elevating the lives of young people, building a better, brighter future for all.

And throughout the pandemic, this is what we have tried to do. My Administration, led by the Children’s Cabinet, worked hard to target the resources of State government to help our children through these hard times and to ensure they live healthy, happy lives.

Among other things, the Children’s Cabinet provided funding for childcare for essential workers; created scholarships to train early childhood educators; created free, comprehensive on-line pre-K through grade 12 learning modules and social emotional curricula for teachers across the state; and trained more than 125 behavioral health clinicians to serve children in need.

But even as we vaccinate thousands of Maine people against the coronavirus every day, and inch closer to getting back to normal, challenges - like the opioid epidemic and the lack of childcare - remain.

A recent analysis by the Bipartisan Policy Center found that close to 5,000 Maine children with working parents, mainly in rural areas, do not live near a childcare program. Quality early childcare and education is critical to the healthy development of young children and to the long-term growth of our economy. It also provides precious peace of mind for parents to know their child is well cared for while they are at work. We need to invest in Maine’s childcare infrastructure to increase the availability and quality of childcare, especially in underserved communities in rural Maine.

The insidious opioid epidemic, made worse by social isolation required by the pandemic, continues to threaten the future of our children and young adults. In the coming year, my Administration will work to increase youth access to behavioral health services, including substance use disorder treatment and prevention.

Protecting the immediate health and well-being of our children is a top priority, but we are also focused on ensuring they have the skills they need to succeed in the future. Over the coming year, my Administration will strengthen connections between Maine’s youth and employers in every sector to create meaningful internships and work experiences that lead to fulfilling and lifelong careers.

Throughout the pandemic, Maine people have been tested as never before, but especially our children. Led by the Children’s Cabinet, my Administration will beat back this pandemic, build a stronger economy, and create a better and brighter future for our children and all those who care for them.

Together, we will show Savanna, and every other child in Maine, that we will not let “COVID-19 affect our hearts being isolated from one another.”

Sincerely,



Janet T. Mills
Governor

ABOUT THE CHILDREN'S CABINET

History

The Maine Children's Cabinet was founded in 1996 by Governor Angus King as a forum for state agencies to collaborate on policy for children and youth. Building on the early successes of the Children's Cabinet, it was codified in Maine law in 2001.

After an eight-year hiatus from 2010 to 2018, Governor Janet Mills reinstated the Children's Cabinet in the spring of 2019, appointing Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew of the Department of Health and Human Services as its Chair. The revitalized Children's Cabinet has set an ambitious agenda for the next four to five years.

Maine Children's Cabinet members include the Commissioners of the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Public Safety, and Corrections. In collaboration with key staff from each of these agencies, the work of Governor Mills' Children's Cabinet is coordinated by staff in the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future.

Purpose and Goals

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.



WORK IN 2020 AND BEYOND

COVID-19 Response

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 proved to be an incredibly challenging year for many children, youth and families across our state. Staff at State agencies, medical offices, community based and social services organizations, local schools and child care programs worked diligently to meet the needs of children, youth, and families under public health protocols that limited in-person interaction. Staff participating in the Children’s Cabinet have been deeply involved in efforts to:

- simplify and streamline access to needed assistance for struggling families;
- support teachers and schools to adapt to remote learning, to provide internet access and devices to all families who need them for home learning, to support the social and emotional needs of children during the pandemic, and to protect the health and safety of children and staff; and
- support and increase children and youth’s access to needed nutrition and health care services, including behavioral health, well-child visits, and routine immunizations.

Assistance to Child Care Programs

A little more than half of Maine’s child care programs closed following the state public health orders in March, with the remaining staying open to care for the children of essential workers. Throughout the late spring and into the summer, child care programs reopened their doors to provide care for children as parents returned to work. The Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) implemented a series of short-term policy changes to support families to maintain or receive assistance with paying for child care and provided a series of grants to assist child care programs facing significant fiscal challenges due to losses in revenue and increased costs as a result of the pandemic. The staff also released

on-going guidance to licensed child care and out of school time programs for protecting the health and safety of children.

With increased funding from the Child Care Development Block Grant in the CARES Act, OCFS took a three-pronged approach to increase access to necessary child care for essential workers and to stabilize and support the re-opening of struggling child care providers:

- Between April 20 and June 30, 2020, essential workers, regardless of income, could receive a child care subsidy for needed child care, which was difficult for some families to find due to the physical closure of schools and some child care programs. Children’s Licensing at OCFS helped new and existing programs to quickly become licensed to provide care to children of essential workers.
- In May, all eligible child care providers received a stipend based upon the number of licensed slots. To reflect the increased cost of operating during a pandemic with smaller group sizes, the need for Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and the increased need for cleaning, child care providers that were open in April received higher stipends than programs that were closed.
- In July, child care programs received recovery grants to support them to modify or resume operations. Grants were only provided to facilities that were open at the time that the grants were awarded.

In the fall of 2020, OCFS administered Coronavirus Relief Funds to enable child care providers to seek reimbursement for increased costs incurred for personal protective equipment and cleaning as a result of the pandemic.

In total, \$13 million of support was delivered to parents and child care providers to support Maine working families.

The Maine YMCAs are incredibly grateful for the childcare grants received from the Office of Child and Family Services with funding from the CARES Act. Childcare is the only of our programs that we've been able to run consistently during the pandemic and we are honored to provide quality care for Maine children so that parents can work. The childcare grants created from the CARES Acts funds were a critical lifeline to our beleaguered organizations during an incredibly challenging year. We used the funds to support staffing and purchase cleaning supplies and PPE. These funds helped us keep our childcare programs running safely so we can continue to meet the needs of our communities.

—Meg Helming, Director of Advocacy & Impact YMCA Alliances of ME and NH/VT



Grants for Day Programming for School Age Children

As plans for the school year took shape in the late summer of 2020, it became clear that many schools across the state would implement “hybrid” schedules in which students would attend school in person for part of the school week and participate in remote learning for part of the school week. This would allow schools to meet the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for protecting the health and safety of staff, teachers, and students.

In response to this new schedule, the Department of Education (DOE) established a grant program to support schools to offer programming for children who needed care during the days that they were participating in remote learning. Forty-two school districts were awarded grants to help offset the cost of providing this care. Most schools chose to partner with community programs like local Parks and Rec, Boys and Girls Club, YMCAs, and other after school or child care programs to provide the care and support for this day-time programming. Because these grants were funded with federal Coronavirus Relief Funds, the programs were originally scheduled to end on December 31, 2020. With the extension of the date for allowable use of CRF, School Administrative Units (SAU) administering grants will be able to continue supporting day programming efforts with any remaining CRF day programming funds through June 2021. Additionally, SAUs can utilize other CRF allocations and the newly allocated Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds in the COVID Relief Package Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act to support day programming.

In addition to the day programming, the Maine Department of Education, in collaboration with curriculum coordinators, Maine educational community organizations, museums, learning centers, and Maine educators, has created a library of asynchronous learning modules for PreK through Grade 12. These project-based learning modules which are known as Maine Online Opportunities for Sustained Education

(MOOSE) are aligned to Maine’s Learning Results. These modules are available for educators, students, and families and are meant to be used for enhancing lessons, remediation, enrichment, credit recovery or for use during remote learning. As of January 7th, MOOSE had 13,000 users.

Implementing Children’s Cabinet Strategies

While the pandemic became the primary focus for many of the Children’s Cabinet staff and members and thus affected some of the Children’s Cabinet’s efforts, the staff still made significant progress in implementing many of its short-term strategies in 2020. The goals, strategies, and areas of focus for the Children’s Cabinet are laid out in the two plans – 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 2020 and highlights some of the Children’s Cabinet plans for 2021.

Strategies to Prepare Young Children to Enter Kindergarten Prepared to Succeed

In 2019, the Department of Education and Department of Health and Human Services as part of the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) planning grant from the federal government conducted a needs assessment of Maine’s birth through five early care and education system.¹ 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 help guide the development of its plan for young children.

The review of the needs assessment and discussions across State agencies throughout the fall of 2019 led the Children’s Cabinet to focus its strategies in three main areas: 1) increasing access to affordable early care and education, preventive, and early intervention services; 2) raising the quality of our early care and education programs; and 3) recruiting, preparing, and retaining a diverse early childhood workforce.



Improving Access and Quality in Maine's Child Care System

The Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) at the Department of Health and Human Services plays a key role in implementing strategies to support families and their children to access 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 Subsidy Program and the state's grant with the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN). The Child Care Subsidy Program provides subsidies to help families with incomes up to 85 percent of the median income pay for child care and afterschool care. The MRTQ PDN provides professional development support to early childhood and out-of-school professionals and programs in Maine. MRTQ hosts a professional registry, provides on-going trainings and credentials to professionals in the field and offers technical assistance through on-line warm line, peer-to-peer networks, and on-site consultation.

OCFS and MRTQ together oversee Maine's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) which was created to provide parents a way to easily identify high-quality early childhood and education programs. The rating system is currently based on four steps, each step leading to higher quality. Step Four is the highest step a program/provider can achieve. All licensed child care programs in Maine – family child care, child care centers, school age programs – are eligible to participate after being in operation for one year. OCFS is in the process of updating the QRIS to a five-star system in order to bring all licensed child care programs into the quality rating system.

In 2020, OCFS led efforts to support more families to access quality early childhood care and education. This included updates to the Child Care Subsidy Program, support for programs to improve quality and supporting early childhood educators to access post-secondary degrees.

The PDG Needs Assessment identified the low number of available infant slots in Maine as a significant challenge for new parents. Because safe and appropriate care for our youngest children requires lower staff to child ratios, infant and toddler care can be more costly to deliver. Programs often subsidize care for infants and toddlers with the funding that they receive for caring for 3 and 4-year olds.

In response to this concern, the Office of Child and Family Services implemented the following strategies on July 1, 2020 with the goal of improving access to affordable infant and toddler care:

- Incentivize the expansion of infant care by implementing a new \$100 per week infant stipend through the Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP). To recognize the higher cost of providing infant care, all child care providers participating in Maine’s quality rating improvement system (QRIS) receive \$100 per week stipend for every infant in their care receiving a child care subsidy. From July 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020, a total of \$325,500 was provided for this strategy.
- Encourage expansion of infant and toddler care and improved quality by implementing a 10% quality bump payment for providers caring for infants and toddlers participating in CCSP. The level of the quality bump is based upon the quality rating of the child care provider. From July 1, 2020 through December 31, 2020, a total of \$358,470 was provided through this strategy.

The Children’s Cabinet is committed to improving the quality of care provided to young children in Maine and to preparing a strong early care and education workforce. Studies show that children enrolled in quality child care are more likely to enter school with better math, language and social skills². Maine’s QRIS is a tool to help parents and policymakers identify quality child care programs, with programs at Step 3 and 4 considered “high quality”. In the PDG Needs Assessment, child care providers expressed an interest in improving quality but cited the need for financial supports, such as help with paying for materials and training, to assist with moving up the quality rating system.

In addition to the changes to subsidies for infant and toddler care, the Office of Child and Family Services implemented the following strategies to support child care programs to improve quality and to help more educators in the field receive post-secondary degrees in Early Childhood Education:

- Offer Quality Improvement Grants to support child care programs to improve their quality and/or retain their accreditation. Child care programs can receive small grants to implement strategies to improve their quality as measured by the Quality Rating Improvement System. Accredited programs at the highest level of quality can receive grants of up to \$1,500 to support them to maintain their accreditation. As of December 31, MRTQ had awarded 49 Quality Improvement Grants to support child care programs to improve quality and 45 Quality Improvement Grants to support programs to achieve or maintain accreditation.
- Support individuals in the child care field to attain post-secondary degrees in Early Childhood Education through the T.E.A.C.H. program. OCFS provided funding to Maine Association of the Education of Young Children to establish the T.E.A.C.H. program which offers scholarships and other supports to individuals working in the child care field to attain either bachelors or associates degree in early childhood education. As of December 31, 2020, 12 scholarships have been provided.



Supporting Child Care Providers and Parents to Address Behavioral Health Needs

Child care providers and families with young children identified the need for “support with strategies for addressing children’s behavioral health challenges” in the PDG Needs Assessment. This concern had been raised as a priority by child advocates, child care providers and the Maine Children’s Growth Council in previous years.

The 129th Maine Legislature passed LD 997 providing legislative authorization and funding to implement an early childhood consultation program at five pilot sites throughout the state. After considerable research and consultation with stakeholders in Maine, the Connecticut Early Childhood Consultation Partnership model was selected based on the strong evidence in support of its effectiveness. The ECCP partners early childhood mental health professionals and early childhood educators to increase their capacity to support children’s social, emotional and behavioral health so that they can develop, learn and succeed. The consultation program also incorporates efforts to support families (including foster families) whose child is experiencing challenging behaviors.

A program manager was hired this past fall to lead the implementation of the pilot. The goal is for the ECCP consultants in all five counties (Androscoggin, Aroostook, Cumberland, Kennebec and Penobscot)



to be hired and trained by the end of January 2021. Implementation is scheduled to begin in February 2021 with programming for educators serving children birth through 3rd grade being phased in over the following year.

Continued and New Initiatives in 2021 to Promote the Healthy Development of Young Children

In addition to monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the already highlighted initiatives in 2021, planning for new initiatives to promote the healthy development of young children and continuing efforts to expand access to quality early care and education are underway.

Strengthening Early Childhood Education Through Greater Inclusion and Supporting Transitions

Maine DOE’s Early Childhood Education (ECE) staff are key partners in the Children’s Cabinet work to prepare young children to succeed in Kindergarten. The ECE staff promote children’s learning by offering information and resources to support public preschool and Head Start teachers and administrators involved in educating Maine’s young learners. The ECE 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; and support the professional development of early childhood professionals in public preschools and Head Start.

The ECE Team at DOE is currently building materials and professional learning opportunities for school administrators and early childhood educators including:

- an inclusive cohort of early childhood educators from public schools and child care programs to participate in a professional learning program to support inclusive and trauma informed practices in early care and education settings. The 30-hour training will support early childhood educators to build the skills, knowledge, resources, and attitudes to offer care and education in an inclusive

environment. The ECE team at DOE has worked closely with staff at OCFS and MRTQ to develop this professional learning program;

- a new series of on-line resources to support educators and families to plan for successful transitions for children as they enter the public school system. Starting public school can be a significant transition for children and families that can be filled with mixed emotions, worries, and many questions for families. Smoothing this transition for children can help them to adjust to the new setting and better prepare them to learn and succeed in school. Throughout 2021, the early learning team at DOE and staff at OCFS will identify other opportunities to support early childhood educators to enhance transitions from the early childhood system into Kindergarten;

- trainings for school administrators on early childhood education to support transitions and build connections between the early care and education systems and public schools at the community level; and

- the development of a Pre-K toolkit to encourage more school districts to expand or implement a quality public Pre-K program. The toolkit will include examples of programs in other communities including highlighting the success of community partnerships between public schools, Head Starts and/or child care programs to establish strong public Pre-K programs. This toolkit builds upon other efforts by the ECE team to support the expansion of public Pre-K, including the development of a free open source Pre-K curriculum (Pre-K for ME) which was made available in August 2019.





Expanding Quality Public Pre-K for 4-Year Olds

The Children’s Cabinet originally set a goal of ensuring that all Maine school districts offer public Pre-K to 4-year olds by 2025. Over the last several years, the state had greatly expanded the number of school districts providing public Pre-K to 4-year olds. Currently, nearly 80% of all school districts offer public Pre-K to 4-year old students in their districts, with about half of all 4-year olds enrolled in a Pre-K program. The expansion of public Pre-K has been significantly delayed by the pandemic. School districts have had little time to focus on any other priorities as they work to meet the educational, social emotional and health and safety needs of students in their schools. The expansion of Pre-K slowed this fall with some districts that had been on track to open new classrooms choosing to pull back. In addition, very few districts, if any, are expected to move forward with opening new classrooms in the fall of 2021. Over the next year, the Children’s Cabinet staff and DOE will work with school district leaders and other stakeholders to discuss and develop new strategies to encourage and incentivize the expansion of public Pre-K. The Children’s Cabinet will continue to focus on efforts to support public Pre-K partnerships between schools, Head Start, and local child care programs as a strategy for overcoming barriers such as a lack of space for new classrooms.

Increasing Development Screenings Rates and Access to Early Intervention Services

As a result of the L.D. 1635 report to the 129th Maine State Legislature, Resolve, To Improve Access to Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment Services for Children from Birth to 8 Years of Age and the Preschool Development Strategic Planning process, an Early Intervention Workgroup was established. This Workgroup is comprised of staff across state agencies at DHHS and DOE that provide early intervention services for children birth through five years old.

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 necessary screenings, evaluations, and services to support their healthy development. Developmental screenings of young children help pediatricians and other professionals to identify developmental delays and disabilities. The earlier delays are recognized, the earlier needed intervention and/or health care services can be provided. Through work directed by Maine Quality Counts, Maine gained tremendous ground in increasing rates of developmental screenings. Over the last few years, rates of developmental screenings have plateaued, and the Children’s Cabinet is committed to identifying ways to continue to increase rates. In 2020, the early intervention workgroup mapped early intervention services, reviewed organizations providing developmental screening across the state, and developed a model and strategies to increase developmental screening.

In 2021, the Workgroup will focus on implementing strategies to increase the rates of development screenings for young children. In 2021, staff across DHHS will work with programs serving young children to move the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), a developmental screening tool, on-line. Providing access to the ASQ on-line for more health care providers, child care providers, Early Head Start and Head Start providers, child care providers, public health nursing, and other professionals working with young children will improve coordination among professionals, allow for greater access to developmental screenings and support the goal of the Children’s Cabinet to increase rates of developmental screenings.

The Early Intervention Workgroup will continue to work together to identify steps to improve the process for referring families to the appropriate evaluations and services following initial screenings. The Public Consulting Group conducted an independent study of the state’s early childhood special education services under the Individual with Disabilities Act Part C for children birth through age three and IDEA Part B-619

for children age three through five which are administered by Child Development Services (CDS). An advisory committee comprised of legislators, staff across state agencies, and public stakeholders has been meeting since late fall to develop a series of recommendations for CDS in response to the independent study and to determine whether or not the provision of Part B services should remain with CDS regional offices or shift to local schools. The Early Intervention Workgroup will work to support CDS in implementation of any changes in response to these recommendations.

With the hiring of a new Children’s Health Insurance Program Coordinator and an Early Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) Coordinator, the Office of MaineCare Services is expanding its capacity to help families with young children to access needed health care coverage and ensure children on MaineCare access needed health care services. In 2021, these positions will work with the Children’s Cabinet Early Intervention Workgroup to identify the best ways to communicate with families about eligibility for MaineCare and its services.

Continue Efforts to Expand Access to Quality Child Care

In 2020, the Office of Child and Family Services worked with policy experts and data analysts at the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) to map the child care supply and demand to identify gaps in care for Maine

working families. BPC analysis found that 10.4% of Maine’s children under six with all available parents working did not have access to formal, licensed child care.³ The gaps were more acute in the rural areas. Rural areas of Maine had a total gap of 13% while there was a 4% gap in urban areas. The gap in some rural counties, such as Franklin County (39%) and Washington County (31%), far exceeded the overall rural percent gap. The Office of Child and Family Services will continue to work with BPC to further refine the data about child care gaps in Maine.

To address the findings of the initial report, the Office of Child and Family Services will work to expand child care slots, particularly in rural areas, by providing start up grants to existing and new child care programs, both center-based and family child care programs. The Children’s Cabinet has the opportunity to learn from partners that are implementing similar efforts in our state. With grant funding from the federal government and John T. Gorman Foundation, Coastal Enterprise Inc. has established a Child Care Business Lab to help entrepreneurs start new, quality child care businesses in Maine in underserved areas of Maine including Maine’s rim counties and new Mainer communities in Lewiston.

Strategies to Support Youth in Their Transition to Adulthood

Staff from the Office of Child and Family Services, the Maine Center for Disease Control (Maine CDC) and the Commissioner’s Office at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Office of School and Student Supports Team at the Department of Education (DOE), the workforce development and training team at the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Juvenile Services team at Department of Correction (DOC) are all involved in implementing the Children’s Cabinet strategies to strengthen programs and policies for youth. Staff from the respective Children’s Cabinet departments invested time in the fall of 2019 conducting an inventory of youth programs and developing a strategic plan to support youth to transition



to adulthood healthy, connected to education and/or the workforce. The Children’s Cabinet focuses its efforts in three main areas: 1) ensuring basic needs of youth and their families are met; 2) increasing prevention services and programming in schools and at the community level; and 3) increasing access to needed behavioral health services, including substance use disorder prevention, screening, and treatment.

Developing a Social Emotional Learning Curriculum

Education and Prevention Research over the past two decades has consistently demonstrated the important and significant positive impacts of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a primary prevention in schools and communities. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines Social Emotional Learning as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”²⁴ SEL interventions support and improve a students’ academic success, classroom behavior, ability to manage emotions and stress and, importantly, attitudes about themselves and others.

Over the last several years, the Maine Department of Human Services DHHS provided over 60 schools in Maine resources and training to implement the Second Step Social Emotional Learning curriculum. Teachers and administrators at these schools responded positively to the resources, though the program was limited to children kindergarten through grade 8 and there was a cost to the program which became more difficult to maintain after the initial grant from the federal government ended.

Both the Trauma-Informed Advisory Task Force established by the 129th Maine Legislature and the Opioid Prevention Task Force of the Governor’s Office of Opiate Response, Chaired by Department of Educa-



tion Commissioner Pender Makin, recommended that the DOE develop and disseminate a universally accessible and social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, available at no cost for schools, Pre-K through 12th grade. In the fall of 2019, Children’s Cabinet members added this strategy to its list of short-term priorities and the DOE added an SEL Specialist position to its Office of School and Student Support to work toward this goal.

The DOE-lead state SEL team (consisting of experts, stakeholders from the field, DOE and DHHS members), with funding from both the Fund for Healthy Maine and the Federal CARES Act, purchased a comprehensive Pre-K through grade 12 SEL curriculum. The SEL4ME curriculum is CASEL aligned and trauma informed and has been customized by Maine experts to meet the diverse needs of our student population across the state. SEL4ME is classroom based with free online access to any educator or school staff with modules designed to be easily embedded into everyday academics and adapted to supplement remote learning. Additionally, SEL4ME may be accessed by families, caregivers, home-schooled entities, community-based organizations, and others who work directly with youth in Maine. With ongoing attention to equity of learning and support opportunities for all Maine children and families, the goal of SEL4ME is for all school district and community programs across the state to have equal access to resources prioritizing the

development of social-emotional competences and the creation of safe and supportive schools, where all students know with certainty that they are safe, respected, valued and represented regardless of race, sexual orientation, or gender.

SEL4ME provides districts with the most recent and up-to-date SEL materials available and can supplement other SEL resources, including school counseling or Second Step programs. SEL4ME also supports social emotional learning standards in Health/Wellness, physical education (PE), and Pre-K. Additionally, the DOE offers free SEL training for adults who are interested in expanding knowledge of adult emotional intelligence. The DOE SEL4ME Team will continue to edit and develop new SEL content and trainings. It will expand from classroom supports to include school and district wide curriculum development in the use of SEL as a Primary Prevention and Trauma Informed practice.

Increasing Access to Evidence-based Behavioral Health Services for Youth

Maine Children’s Behavioral Health Services in OCFS is committed to ensuring that all Maine children and their families receive the services and supports they need to live safe, healthy and productive lives in their

home, school and community. The Division has partnered with the Children’s Cabinet and other stakeholders to expand evidence-based behavioral health services for youth.

In 2020, OCFS spearheaded a number of initiatives:

- In the summer of 2020, OCFS funded a contract with nationally certified Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) trainers who are providing training at no cost to 125 clinicians to become nationally certified. TF-CBT is widely recognized as an effective evidence-based treatment modality. Clinicians are provided with reimbursement for their time spent on the training and will receive ongoing clinical support, training, and consultation. OCFS has also worked with the trainers to develop a system of tracking fidelity to the model to ensure youth and families benefit fully from this service.
- OCFS has initiated a pilot project in Aroostook County that aims to improve the system of crisis care for youth in Maine. The current system provides care for youth when they are in crisis or in need of intensive services but little in terms of support for families, both during the crisis event and afterwards, as the youth and family members try to connect with community services to prevent the need for crisis support in the future. The pilot

At SequelCare for Youth, we are confident that the TF-CBT training received by our staff will improve our services and outcomes for the youth we serve. Our staff will now have a common evidence-based approach to support our clients who have a history of trauma that impedes their functioning. TF-CBT training provides clinicians the appropriate tools to support clients to retell and process their stories of trauma in a way that acknowledges the trauma they have experienced, helps them to learn coping skills to manage their feelings about their trauma and ultimately supports them to heal.

—Merrilee Dahm Larsen, LCPC, CCS
DIVISION CLINICAL DIRECTOR, Sequel Youth and Family Services



provides aftercare and stabilization services for both youth and their family members following discharge from emergency departments, psychiatric hospitals, crisis stabilization, and/or residential treatment. The aftercare services are focused on helping the youth and their family understand the treatment recommendations and access necessary services within their community.

- OCFS also worked collaboratively with the Office of MaineCare Services to complete a rate study for Multisystemic Therapy (MST) and Functional Family Therapy (FFT), two treatment modalities with significant evidence that supports their effectiveness, as well as TF-CBT. Based on that rate study, a 20% rate increase was implemented in April 2020, making Maine’s reimbursement rate for MST and FFT one of the highest in the nation. Maine has also transitioned from 15-minute billing to a weekly case rate in May 2020.

Improving Services and Environments for Students in Schools

The staff at the Adolescent and School Health Program at the Maine Center for Disease Control (Maine CDC) work with State and community partners to ensure that youth have access to prevention programs, accessible health services, and supportive school environments. With funding from the Fund for Healthy Maine, the Maine CDC has implemented a series of initiatives to improve school environments for youth and improve behavioral health services for youth in the schools and in the community. While the pandemic has hindered some of these efforts, the Maine CDC and its partners have found ways to implement these strategies which include:

- Supporting school-based health centers to provide additional hours for mental and behavioral health services to students.

- Funding Maine Youth Advocates Network to provide restorative practices support, education & technical assistance in schools.
- Increasing training and technical assistance for behavioral health organizations on effective screening and identification of suicide prevention for youth with substance use disorders.
- Expanding implementation of the Zero Suicide Model among health care providers, FQHCs, and behavioral health organizations.



Looking Forward to 2021: Continued Work to Strengthen Policies and Programs for Youth

In 2021, the Children’s Cabinet will continue to build upon these initiatives, evaluate the impact of these initiatives on youth, and plan for the implementation of certain Children’s Cabinet’s medium-term strategies.

Continue and expand upon efforts to increase evidence-based behavioral health services for youth

With the support of grant funding, OCFS in 2021 will continue its work to expand evidence-based behavioral health services for youth.

- OCFS has been awarded a four-year, \$8.5 million Systems of Care grant from the federal government to improve behavioral health services available for

children and youth in their homes and communities. The Systems of Care team at OCFS will focus on addressing systemic issues that affect access to behavioral health services, particularly in rural communities, including coordinating children’s clinical care across providers, engaging families in available services, supporting data-informed decision making, increasing access to evidence-based practices, and improving service quality.

- The Children’s Cabinet secured a grant from the John T. Gorman Foundation to fund a one-year position at OCFS to focus on expanding evidence-based substance use treatment for youth across the state. The person in this position will work closely with the Systems of Care team at OCFS to coordinate efforts to reach more youth with necessary services to keep them healthy, stable and connected to their families and communities.

Expanding Opportunities for Meaningful Paid Work Experience for Youth

In 2021, the Children’s Cabinet will work on efforts to increase opportunities for youth to participate in paid work experience, work-based learning or internships. Participation in paid work prior to graduating from high school is a strong indicator of future success.

The team from the Department of Labor has years of experience in developing training programs, supporting transitioning youth with career exploration and work-based learning, and connecting young adults and employers through the successful Maine Apprenticeship Program. The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) at the Department of Labor have over 25 counselors serving transition aged youth with disabilities to prepare them to enter employment. These services include career exploration, self-advocacy, peer mentoring, work-based learning, guidance and counseling, education and training, and job development and placement. In addition, DOL was awarded a 5-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to implement and evaluate two interventions with high school students with disabilities in the Augusta and Bangor areas. DOL set a goal of having 90% of



participants enter post-secondary education or employment within a year of graduation. To date, 350 students have enrolled in the program. All participating students must participate in two paid work experiences. Early evaluation findings show positive results from the program: students with disabilities who participated in the Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG) program

were 17% more likely to graduate from high school and youth who participate in Progressive Employment have higher rates of work-based learning services. Additionally, the research is showing that participation in JMG and DVR services has a positive impact on future earnings.



In 2021, the Children’s Cabinet will work with staff from DOL on the following initiatives:

- Staff from the Maine Department of Labor’s Apprenticeship Program are collaborating with the Career and Technical Education at DOE, the Maine Community College System, businesses, and other stakeholders to develop pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programming for youth. Youth apprenticeship is a structured work-based learning program that connects educational needs of youth with talent needs of industry. The Maine Apprenticeship Program has been extremely successful in providing structured on-the-job learning experiences and related classroom instruction for adults in Maine.
- A cross-agency working group will work to better understand existing opportunities for youth to participate in paid work and identify opportunities for new programming.

End Notes

1. The 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/preexpansiongrant>
2. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. 2000. From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/9824>.
3. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/child-care-gap/> The Bipartisan Policy Center conducted this analysis in 25 states. Maine’s statewide gap was far below the average gap of 37.1% for all 25 states.
4. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>



CONCLUSION

The Children's Cabinet work will continue to be adjusted in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has created new and different challenges for children, youth, and families. Nonetheless, the Cabinet and its staff have continued to make significant progress in implementing strategies toward its two goals and look forward to building on and expanding this work in 2021.

STORIES HIGHLIGHTING THE GAP IN CHILD CARE IN MAINE

As stated in the report, analysis conducted by the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) found that 10.4% of Maine’s children under six with all available parents working did not have access to formal, licensed child care. The BPC analysis examined gaps in child care in 25 states. Maine’s statewide gap was far below the average gap of 37.1% for all 25 states. The Governor and the Children’s Cabinet are concerned about Maine’s child care gap, particularly in the rural areas of the state. Being able to secure affordable, reliable and quality child care provides peace of mind for working parents and is important for the healthy development of young children in our state.

To help address this gap, Governor Mills has proposed a Back to Work bond package that includes \$6 million to provide grants to renovate, expand, or construct child-care facilities and increase the availability and quality of childcare – with half of that money going directly to underserved communities in rural Maine. This bond funding will provide targeted infrastructure support for expansion and start-ups of child care facilities, especially in rural areas with significant coverage gaps and higher rates of poverty. This initiative coupled with the other child care initiatives outlined in this report will support the Children’s Cabinet goal of increasing access to quality child care in Maine.

These stories highlight some of the challenges that families face in accessing needed child care in Maine. Two of these stories are from Washington County where the gap in care in the Bipartisan Policy Center report was found to be greater than in most other parts of the state.

Savannah from Cherryfield, Washington County

Savannah lives in Cherryfield with her husband and two young children. She has struggled for years to find consistent quality child care for her children. When Savannah got a job at an afterschool program, doing

work with school age kids which she loved, she was unable to find care in her region. She searched for care that matched her work hours but there were no available slots at any center-based or family-based facilities. To ensure that she could work, her husband had to take a pay cut so that he could leave work early and care for their daughter, who was three at the time, in the afternoons.

Since that time, Savannah has pieced together care for her two children, finding friends who could care for her children during the day. For a period of time, her youngest son was taken care of by a friend who had two children of her own. The friend did the best she could to care for the three children, but Savannah worried that her son, who has special needs, was not getting the support that he needed to grow and thrive. After being on the wait list at the Flaherty Early Care and Education Center at the University of Maine at Machias for more than a year and a half, Savannah was notified that there was a slot available for her son. She is relieved and has peace of mind knowing that her son is getting care and early intervention services in a quality setting where adults are attentive to his developmental needs.





Cassie from Sidney, Kennebec County

Cassie lives in Sidney and works at the Sappi Mill. She started looking for infant care when she was 5 months pregnant. She called 35 to 40 child care facilities. She was told that none of them had open slots for infants. She put her name on numerous waitlists. After having her baby earlier than expected, she began to reach out again to more child care facilities. She had not been taken off of any of the waitlists and she was being told again that no one had any slots. Right before she was scheduled to go back to work, she was able to find an infant slot at a home-based child care program in Skowhegan. Cassie was nervous that she was going to have to give up her job if she had been unable to find care.

Magen from Indian Township, Washington County

When grant funding for her position at a local child-serving agency in Indian Township ran out, Magen decided to go back to school to get an Associate's Degree in Human Services. Magen's goal is to attain a degree so that she can work in social services and help families and children. In March last year, the Indian Township Day Care Center where Magen's two young children were enrolled closed and has not reopened. Magen searched for child care in Indian Township and surrounding towns of Calais, Baileyville, Princeton and others, but the handful of child care programs in the area have long wait lists. Work obligations prevent family and friends from being able to step in to help. Unable to access child care, Magen had to disenroll

from her degree program and put her plans for school and career on hold. She continues to search for care for her two young children but remains discouraged and frustrated by the absence of options in her region.

Jennifer Stevens and Rae Ann Lajoie from Vassalboro, Kennebec County

Jennifer was a social worker in Waterville and Rae Ann was a manager at Hannaford for years. Over five years ago, the women took two of their grandchildren and a step grandchild into their home. Rae Ann had already left her job to care full-time for her mother who had dementia, but they needed to find child care for their grandchildren. Rae Ann had to focus on caring for her mother and eventually planned to go back to work. After searching for care for several months and being unable to find slots in the same facility, Rae Ann and Jennifer finally found someone who could come into their home to care for their children.

When Rae Ann's mother passed away, Rae Ann, with 20 plus years of experience as a manager, and Jennifer, with a degree in early childhood and years working in social work, decided that they needed to do something to address the lack of children in their region. In 2019, they decided to build and open the Happy Days Child Care and Learning Center in Winslow Maine where they now provide care for 49 children aged 12 weeks to 12 years old. Their center is always full and they have 30 families on their waitlist and they have stopped putting new names on the list.



PLAN FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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 in a culturally and linguistically accessible way as we further develop and implement our strategies.

Areas of Focus

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.

- Provide min-grants to child care programs to improve quality and rating on the QRIS.
- Expand professional learning opportunities that support inclusive and trauma informed practices in early care and education (ECE) settings.
- Build the infrastructure for an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS).

Intermediate strategies: 2020 – 2023

- Streamline, simplify and raise awareness about the eligibility process for the Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP).
- Implement the early childhood mental health consultation pilot sites to help parents and educators support the social and emotional development of young children, particularly children with special needs.
- Revise the QRIS system to be a five-star system to bring all licensed child care programs into the state’s quality rating system.
- Support families to navigate Child Find, Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment in MaineCare, and Child Development Services to ensure children receive necessary health and intervention services.
- Ensure that substance use screening, treatment and support for recovery is available for pregnant mothers through the child’s infancy.
- Offer a professional learning series on early childhood education to school administrators, particularly for those with ECE programs.

Children’s Cabinet Strategies

Short term strategies: 2020 - 2021

- Provide start-up mini-grants to existing or new child care programs to create new slots, particularly in rural areas.
- Offer weekly stipends of \$100 to infant caregivers receiving CCSP to recognize the high cost of providing infant care.
- 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.

Long-term strategies: 2020 – 2025

- Expand public pre-K for 4 year olds and fund start-up grants to incentivize partnerships between schools, Head Start and child care programs.
- Expand the early childhood mental health consultation program statewide.
- Support opportunities and strategies for increasing wages for early childhood educators.
- Increase access to, expand and strengthen early childhood programming at Career and Technical schools.
- Ensure no wrong door for families to access services, such as SNAP, MaineCare and WIC, and establish a centralized entity around developmental screening and care coordination for early intervention services.
- Ensure access to and utilization of high-quality preventive services for young children and their families.
- Increase professional development and coaching opportunities for early educators in center-based and family child care programs.
- Establish an Early Childhood Integrated Data System to track progress on early childhood goals and to analyze impact of policy decisions.



PLAN FOR MAINE YOUTH

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

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.

- 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.
- Expand implementation of the Zero Suicide Model among health care providers, FQHCs, and behavioral health organizations.

Intermediate strategies: 2020 – 2023

- Improve and align behavioral health screenings across state agencies to ensure early identification and referral to services.
- 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 paid internships or paid work.
- Increase awareness of careers, career pathways and access points to post-secondary education and training programs.

Children’s Cabinet Strategies

Short term strategies: 2020 - 2021

- Train 3 cohorts of Maine therapists (for a total of 180) in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.
- Strengthen children’s crisis services to keep youth with their families, starting with a demonstration project in a rural area.
- 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 Advocates Network to provide restorative practices support, education & technical assistance in schools.

Long-term strategies: 2020 – 2025

- 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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