



Promising Practices to Follow for Community School State Coalitions

Maine Coalition of Community Schools: Building a Visioning Day

Target Audience: State and Initiative Leaders

On August 7, 2023 the Maine Coalition of Community Schools and the Maine Department of Education organized a one-of-a-kind statewide Visioning Day in Augusta, Maine. Facilitated by Charley Martin-Berry and Julie Redding from the [Community Caring Collaborative](#) of Washington County, over 50 participants representing various sectors, institutions, and organizations, gathered to co-create a shared vision and plan to advance Community Schools in Maine.

As outlined in the [Building a Community Schools System Guide](#), once an initiative has convened innovators, assessed readiness, and compiled a rationale for Community Schools, it's important to engage the larger community to co-create a shared vision and identify core values. By doing so, the initiative begins to build trusting relationships and cultivate the buy-in necessary for scale and sustainability.

While Maine has three state-recognized¹ Community Schools, as authorized and established by [Title 20A MRSA Chapter 333](#), when an internal scan of those organizing in a similar way or who share a similar vision and values was conducted, multiple models emerged. Those models were then identified as critical partners.

While there are many ways to co-create a vision, Maine's approach and structure of their Visioning Day is one that can be replicated by other states. Essential elements consisted of:

- **Grounding & Context:** Share common language on what Community Schools are.
- **Ice Breaker:** Introduce participants and to uplift assets within the community.
- **Large Group Visioning:** Share thoughts and ideas on how Community Schools can help students, families, communities reach their full potential.
- **Poster Session:** Highlight work of existing Community Schools and an opportunity to learn more about the Coordinators role.
- **Panel Discussion:** Highlight other existing collaboratives and entry points into the work.
- **Reflection:** Make meaning of information shared and how it can be applied to participants work.
- **Small Group Breakouts:** Identify assets and root causes to barriers.
- **Action Steps:** Gather consensus on next steps.

¹ Maine celebrates that many schools have community school designations in its title. However, a limited number of grant funds currently exists.



If schools and communities are working in partnership to support kids and families, what would it look like in Maine?

Grounding & Context: Julie Smyth, Director of Office of School and Student Supports at Maine Department of Education and Erin Frati, Director of the Maine Afterschool Network provided opening remarks and shared the history of Community Schools in Maine dating back to 2015. To establish common language and understanding of what Community Schools are, they utilized the [Framework: Essentials for Community Schools Transformation](#) resource and [What is a Community School?](#) video from the Partnership for the Future of Learning. This proved to be a great way to ensure a baseline of knowledge. Joline Collins, Northeast Region Deputy Director at the Coalition for Community Schools/IEL, provided national context, before Community Caring Collaborative (CCC) facilitators were introduced. CCC facilitators then conducted an [Indigenous Land Acknowledgement](#).



Ice Breaker: From the very beginning, and re-enforced throughout the day, participants were encouraged to have an abundance mindset. They were to “wear multiple hats”, speak from the wholeness and duality of their experiences (for example: parent *and* school administrator) and to have a future and inquiry approach. Sentences that start with “what if we” and “how might we” were also encouraged and even rewarded with gifts. Each attendee then shared their name, school organization, and their favorite community resource that they have used. Though it took a bit of time, it was well worth it. Everyone was aware of the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of participants and by sharing their favorite community resource it surfaced the assets that already exist in the community. *Participants included staff from the Maine Department of Education, policymakers, universities, school-based health centers,*



superintendents, librarians, business, teachers, social work, community-based organizations, nonprofits, and more. When a resource that represented another participant’s organization or area of work was shared, people would light up. Before long, the room was energized and a collaborative, gracious space was established.



Large Group Visioning:
With everyone’s mindset and dispositions shifted into a positive frame, attendees were now able to answer the big question of the day; **If schools and communities are working in partnership to support kids and**



families, what would it look like in Maine? Via [Padlet](#), participants inputted their responses. Facilitators used prompts to consider the many layers of this work. For example, what would the role of the educator look like? Or, what would budgets look like? Next, participants reviewed others’ answers, affirmed one another and elaborated on posts in a large group. Responding to the comments, participants began to ask and say things like:

- “How might we better engage businesses?”
- “I can be a part of this, even if it’s not my role.”,
- “It’s not just for them; it’s for everyone.”



Talbot Community School
PK-5 Title I Community School in Portland, ME

- ✓ ~400 students, 110 staff
- ✓ Multilingual population with over 27 languages spoken
- ✓ Over 68% of students qualify for free/reduced lunch
- ✓ Suburban school with integrated community resources

Goals

- Support student growth in academic achievement
- Provide opportunities for engagement in beyond the bell programming that supports physical, social, emotional well-being as well as learning & development
- Increase family/school engagement around students' education

Strategies

- Provide targeted tutoring support to students
- Increase beyond the bell opportunities in collaboration with community partners; be responsive to student interests and needs
- Develop family/school engagement opportunities that are responsive to multiple community needs

Beyond the Bell:

- SeaChange Yoga
- Comic Book Club
- Cooking Matters
- Running Club
- Inclusive Storytelling (Telling Room & IRLBC)
- Civil Rights Team

Family/School Engagement:

- Homework Dinners
- Coffee with the Principal
- Community Resource Fairs
- Back to School Popsicle Party
- Kindergarten Information Night
- Working School Bus

Homework Dinners:

The Winter 2024 survey asked 5 Homework Dinners our inaugural year. Here's what folks had to say about their experience with Homework Dinners:

"The whole Homework Dinner idea is wonderful. My children and I all enjoyed and appreciated what I have done and I will continue to do it. Thank you for all the support!"

"The survey really helped me get engaged in learning. The really enjoyed playing with games. My kids having about 20 minutes from school. Everyone should come to homework dinner. Thank you for being supportive!"

Poster Session: During the break, participants learned about local Community Schools supported by the Maine Department of Education. They were informed about the various initiatives and outcomes and asked questions of the Community School Coordinator and recently retired school administrator.

Panel Discussion: Through an interactive panel discussion, attendees learned about additional models and entry points to Community Schools. Perspectives included School-Based Health Centers; [First4ME](#) via Maine Department of Health and Human Service, Office of Child and Family Services; [First 10](#) via Maine Department of Early Learning; school-based initiatives. The panelist shared key elements, key partners, headline success, and HOW they got started. *For those looking to*

implement a similar strategy, this is a great opportunity to honor existing collaborations. There are multiple entry-points into Community Schools and by learning about various efforts, opportunities for alignment emerge.



Reflection: Any time a lot of information is shared, it's important to give attendees time to reflect individually and with others. By asking "What resonates or excites you about what's been shared" and "how might we take our inspiration and move it into reality? Without recognizing it, participants begin to identify next steps. They discussed the importance of cross-sector



collaboration, how to raise awareness with others not part of the meeting, and how to utilize resources that already exist.

One participant's aha moment was "if not me, then who"? And, not in a deficit way in which the work will be stalled, but who else needs to be engaged and/or connected to this work to amplify the impact on students, families, and communities? By this point in the meeting, there was a desire to take action and connect others with the Community School strategy.

Small Group Discussion: Building off feedback from the large group visioning session, comments were codified and themes were identified. Participants selected a theme they wanted to discuss in greater detail and began to identify assets, root-cause barriers, and how they hoped this topic will progress by next year and even five years from now. Throughout the conversation, participants were able to think deeply about actions associated with their topic. At one table, they began to think about other partners that can be engaged. They discussed how businesses, faith-based partners, caregivers, and community organizations can be better engaged and become true partners in the work. On the topic of sustainability, a school board member was in the same group as a principal. The principal shared what it would take to ensure Community School efforts weren't demolished when leadership changed, and the school board member listened intently and took notes commenting that they needed to have more conversations like this and stay connected.

Closing: In closing, participants answered the prompt "Today I walked in Thinking X about Community Schools; Now I think X. The responses showed both the appreciation for the work and desire to stay connected. The organizers and facilitators received consensus on the need to extend the collaboration even more and to educate others on the opportunities connected to Community Schools. To do that, common language and communication will need to be developed. While this was already a known next step prior to the Visioning Day, having others validate it and cultivating new champions for the work, as demonstrated by an increase in sign-ons to the Maine Coalition of Community Schools, strengthens the movement and is one step in ensuring its sustainability.

While often overlooked, establishing a strong vision and identifying assets (people, practices, policies) are critical for the scaling and sustainability of any Community School. By doing so, one creates a larger tent for collaboration, which can yield to more aligned systems and resources. When the focus is only on needs and barriers, it's easy to get caught in a narrow and deficit mindset trap. The challenges can feel too big and it's more difficult to facilitate collaboration because others don't see themselves as part of the solution. State coalitions and existing cross-sector collaborations, like the Maine Coalition of Community Schools, are well positioned to take on this work. Their ability to convene, influence collaboration and connect to best practices is one that should not easily be dismissed. While this was a great meeting, it was only a step in creating a vision. It was recognized that more voices needed to be heard - from families,



students, and others. While there is no perfect way of building a system of Community Schools, Maine's Visioning Day is a practical yet profound example on how to move this work forward.

To learn more about the Maine Coalition of Community Schools Visioning Day, please contact Julie Smyth (Julie.A.Smyth@maine.gov), Ann Hanna (Ann.C.Hanna@maine.gov), and Erin Frati (erin.frati@maine.edu).

To learn more about how to build a system of Community Schools or more about the Community Schools strategy, contact visit Communityschools.org or contact ccs@iel.org.