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2024 Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education Advisory Committee Report to the Legislative Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Committee Mission

The mission of the Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education (TDAE) Advisory Committee is to make recommendations to the Commissioner for the development and implementation of state and local policies and programs to effectively address truancy and dropouts in state schools.

Background

The Legislature established the Office of Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education in 1986. It includes a 15-member advisory committee defined as “individuals and public and private institutions who are involved or interested in the problem and its solution.” Members meet defined roles in these institutions.

The committee includes representatives of teachers, elementary school principals, secondary school principals, adult education staff with experience in high school completion, superintendents, administrators from private schools with alternative education programs, Department of Health & Human Services, Department of Corrections, Department of Labor, Local Positive Action Committee on Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education, businesses, and individuals who the Commissioner feels will contribute to the development of effective policies and programs

Members of the TDAE Advisory Committee are appointed by the Commissioner of the Department of Education for a two-year term. Individuals appointed or re-appointed in 2023 include:

1. **Julie Wallace**, alternative education teacher, Main Street Middle School, Madison
2. **Jen Cyr**, principal, Weatherbee Elementary School, Hampden
3. **Nicole Case**, principal, Machias Memorial High School
4. **Christian Elkington**, superintendent RSU 9, Farmington
5. **Raye Leonard**, adult education director, Boothbay, Wiscasset, RSU 12, RSU 40
6. **Sarah Knowlton**, social counselor, RSU 2 Monmouth Academy
7. **Joseph Hufungel**, The Landing Place, Rockland
8. **Katie MacDonald**, Division of Disease Prevention, Maine Department of Health & Human Services
9. **Kristan Tod**, Project IMPACT, Long Creek Youth Development Center, Maine Department of Corrections
10. **Tim Small**, Vocational Rehabilitation, Maine Department of Labor
11. **Lenny Holmes**, MSAD 6 Director, The Learning Center and President, Alternative Education Association of Maine
12. **Rebecca Millett**, Representative House District 123, Commissioner appointment

13. **Susan Lieberman**, Attendance Works, Portland, Commissioner appointment
14. **Dawn Matthews**, Summit Academy, Houlton, Commissioner appointment
15. **TBD**, business community member

Julie Smyth is the Maine DOE representative.

Definitions & Data

Truancy is defined as the percentage of students who are required to attend school but who have unexcused absences. If they are in grade 7 or above, they are considered truant if they have the equivalent of 10 full days of unexcused absences or 7 consecutive unexcused school days. If the student is in grade 6 or lower, it is the equivalent of 7 full days of unexcused absences or 5 consecutive unexcused school days. **In the 2022-2023 school year, 16,588 students were identified as truants.**

Truancy Rates

| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|-----------|-------|------|-------|------|------|
| Statewide | 5.57% | 4.2% | 13.9% | 8.9 | 9.5% |

The **four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate** is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. From the beginning of ninth grade, students who enter that grade for the first time form a cohort that is subsequently “adjusted” by adding any students who transfer into the cohort later during ninth grade, and the next three years, and subtracting any students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die during that same period. In School Year 2022-2023, 12,171 Maine students graduated within the four-year adjusted cohort. It is concerning that the graduation rate for students who are homeless is 55.1%; students who are economically disadvantaged is 78.9%, and for students in foster care is 56.7%

Four-Year Adjusted Graduation Rates

| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Statewide | 87.4% | 87.4% | 86.1% | 86.3% | 87.3% |

Chronic absenteeism is the percentage of students who missed more than 10% of enrolled days and includes excused and unexcused absences. Research shows that absences add up, regardless of why they are taken, and directly impact student engagement, learning, and access to needed supports. By SY 2022-2023, over 42,640 Maine students were chronically absent. The percentage is even higher for students who are economically disadvantaged at 36.3% and for students with disabilities at 33.9%.

Chronic Absenteeism Rates

| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Statewide | 16.8% | 18.3% | 20.9% | 29.8% | 25.5% |

Suspension

A school board may authorize a principal to suspend students for up to a maximum of 10 days for infractions of school rules. A school board may not authorize the principal to issue an out-of-school suspension to a student who is enrolled in grade 5 or below, except in cases where a firearm is involved or there is imminent danger of serious physical injury, and less restrictive interventions would be ineffective. An out-of-school suspension for a student who is enrolled in grade 5 or below may not exceed 3 days. The numbers below indicate the number of suspensions statewide.

Suspension Rates

| Statewide | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| In-school suspensions | 4,659 | 5,398 | 3,857 | 808 | 5,017 |
| Out-of-school suspensions | 6,921 | 8,610 | 5,697 | 2,189 | 9,544 |

Past TDAE Committee Activity

Based on recommendations from the previous TDAE report, the TDAE committee partnered with legislators and stakeholder groups to promote the following legislation in the 131 Legislative session:

- LR 842 An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism was passed and enacted in the fall of 2023.
- The Maine DOE Diploma, made available to students who could not satisfy local school district requirements for a diploma because of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, was extended to 2026.

The following two proposed legislative actions were tabled with the Appropriations Committee to be reviewed during the current session:

- LD 1769 [An Act Concerning Students who Experience Disruption Due to Temporary or Permanent Changes Where They Live](#)
- LD 1527 [An Act to Promote the Community School Program](#)

Current TDAE Committee Activity

The TDAE Committee convened its 2023-2024 work in September 2023. A leadership team, including Susan Lieberman and Raye Leonard as co-chairs, and Joseph Hufnagel as vice chair, meets regularly to plan agendas and meeting activities in advance of monthly committee meetings.

Over the past two years, the TDAE committee has reviewed data, surveyed members, invited guests to present on topics related to its work, and partnered with others to survey alternative

education programs in Maine to identify the following priorities for its work. In 2023, the TDAE Committee partnered with the Alternative Education Association of Maine and the Maine Department of Education to survey alternative education programs in Maine which helped formulate one of our recommendations.. Subcommittees were formed to develop recommendations in each of the priority areas. Priorities and subcommittee members follow:

1. Create alternatives to suspension (Katie, Kristan, Dawn, Raye)
2. Create a position for an Alternative Education Coordinator within the Maine Department of Education (Joseph, Julie W., Chris)
3. Create guidance for Maine's [Chronic Absence Statute](#) (Jen, Sarah, Susan, Julie)
4. Promote district differentiated high school diplomas (Lenny, Nicole, Tim)
5. Update state truancy statute (Susan, Joseph, Raye)

Recommendations

1. Create a position for a Coordinator for Alternative Education at the Maine Department of Education.

Alternative education serves students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting. The Maine Department of Education needs a dedicated professional to support alternative education in the field, to build programs, and/or help existing programs connect with resources. Presently, ME DOE does not have a staff person who is responsible for supporting alternative education programs. In addition, it is challenging to locate resources on the ME DOE website that support alternative education programs.

Alternative education students in Maine are typically those students who are failing academically, lack engagement in school, and may have a higher probability of dropping out of school.

The TDAE Committee believes a Maine DOE Coordinator for Alternative Education can provide extensive outreach with the goal of supporting current programs and expanding quality alternative education programming to all Maine districts interested in offering alternative education programs. In addition, the coordinator can partner with stakeholders to develop alternative education standards based on best practice and evidenced based research.

In 2023, the TDAE Committee initiated a partnership with Maine Alternative Education Association and Maine Department of Education to survey districts about their alternative education programs. Based on survey responses from over 70 Maine districts, 80% of the school districts in Maine have some type of alternative education programming. Ninety percent of those programs are high school level, and 10% are middle school programs. Currently, Maine has about 10 middle school alternative programs.

Dropout prevention research suggests that if a student can see themselves as graduating from high school in grade nine, then they are four times more likely to meet that goal. Catching a student who may need an alternative setting before they enter high school can be the key to successfully completing.

Through communication and data collection, students can be identified by sixth grade. During middle school, teachers have more flexibility and creativity with the curriculum than in high school. Students can rebuild their confidence by practicing foundational skills, use exploration to identify strengths, and develop a trusting relationship with an adult.

A ME DOE Coordinator for Alternative Education can provide support to expand existing programs or initiate new programs, so every Maine school district has the capacity to develop high school and middle school alternative education programs.

2. Create alternatives to suspension

The TDAE Committee recommends Maine DOE promote statewide restorative discipline practices to decrease suspensions and expulsions in every Maine school district.

- Encourage all Maine school districts to sign up for and take part in the [Creating a Culture of Care in Schools training](#) provided by the DOE;
- Inform stakeholders, e.g., Maine Principals Association, Maine School Superintendent Association, Maine Education Association, Maine School Counselor Association, Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities about the benefits of restorative practices;
- Increase capacity of Maine School Safety Center's Maine Safe Schools Initiative to facilitate Creating a Culture of Care in Schools training.

There is a growing body of evidence that shows that suspensions are ineffective tools for behavior change and can lead to worse student outcomes in the short term¹. Suspending students denies students opportunities to learn², creates feelings of alienation, and increases the rate of dropout³. In the long term, being suspended increases the likelihood

¹ Lacoe, J., & Steinberg, M. P. (2019). Do Suspensions Affect Student Outcomes? Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 41(1), 34-62. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373718794897>

² Gregory, A., Bell, J., Pollock, M. (2016). How Educators Can Eradicate Disparities in School Discipline. In: Skiba, R., Mediratta, K., Rausch, M. (eds) Inequality in School Discipline. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51257-4_3

³ Balfanz, Robert; byrnes, vaghan; and Fox, Joanna (2014) "Sent Home and Put Off-Track: The Antecedents, Disproportionalities, and Consequences of Being Suspended in the Ninth Grade," Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1217>

that a student will experience criminal victimization, criminal involvement, and incarceration years later, as adults⁴. Recent research also suggests that there are demographic disparities in the use of suspensions as a disciplinary consequence and that certain subgroups of students, particularly those from minority and high poverty backgrounds, are more likely to be suspended, as well as more often, for longer durations of time, and for more minor offenses⁵

In Maine, suspensions increased from 2014-2019 by more than 2.5-fold and decreased in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, however, there was an increase over 2019, which was the highest up until that point. The percentage of students removed from school for reasons not related to drug use and violence has increased every year except 2020 and 2021 from 36% in 2013 to 65% in 2022.

Rather than suspending students we should be teaching appropriate replacement behaviors that allow students to maintain or improve their academic skills and try to keep kids in instructional time as much as possible.

There are many types of restorative practices described in [Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools](#).

3. Create guidance to align with [Chronic Absence Statute](#)

The Legislature enacted a statute on chronic absenteeism that was signed into law in October 2023. The TDAE committee recommends that a manual be created, and professional development be offered to school districts to provide guidance on implementing evidence-based strategies to address chronic absence.

The manual should provide a framework that local school district administrators can use. It should include nationally recognized best practices that are aimed at improving student attendance, decreasing rates of chronic absence, and enhancing student outcomes. Guidance should incorporate a multi-tiered system with Foundational and Tier 1 universal strategies that support all students; Tier 2 strategies that support students who missed 10-19% of school days; and Tier 3 strategies to support students who have missed 20% or more days of school. The multi-tiered system will comprise of both proactive and reactive strategies that can be integrated into existing tiered systems.

⁴ Kerrin C. Wolf & Aaron Kupchik (2017) School Suspensions and Adverse Experiences in Adulthood, Justice Quarterly, 34:3, 407-430, DOI: 10.1080/07418825.2016.1168475

⁵ Balfanz, Robert; Byrnes, Vaughan; and Fox, Joanna (2014) "Sent Home and Put Off-Track: The Antecedents, Disproportionalities, and Consequences of Being Suspended in the Ninth Grade," Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk: Vol. 5: Issue. 2, Article 13. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1217>

The manual should be available electronically and offered with a series of professional development and coaching sessions. There may be some differentiation between elementary and secondary schools.

4. Promote district differentiated high school diplomas

The TDAE Committee recommends that the present “COVID ME DOE Diploma” continue beyond 2026. The Maine DOE Diploma has already recognized all students do not experience life the same and that exceptions have to be made. ([MRS 20-A Chapter 211, Subchapter 5](#)) However, the current DOE Diploma will sunset in 2026 and return to a limited definition for students to be eligible. To be eligible for the Maine DOE Diploma, the student must have experienced one of the following: a.) Homeless Situation or Foster Home, b.) Attended 3 different High Schools, c.) Been in a residential treatment center for two weeks for mental health, substances, etc. The TDAE Committee believes that students experiencing educational disruption or extenuating life circumstances should have the same opportunity as all Maine students to earn an approved high school diploma.

In addition, the TDAE recommends that Maine DOE support local School Districts develop a Differentiated/Educational Disruption Diploma for students who the local School District determined have experienced extenuating life circumstances or educational disruptions that have put them at a disadvantage and negatively impacted their educational experience.

By developing a Differentiated/Educational Disruption Diploma, school districts can provide an alternative that meets the needs of their local community. Currently Bonny Eagle High School in SAD #6 has successfully implemented the option.

5. Update truancy statute

The truancy statute has not been updated since 1985. The TDAE Committee recommends that the truancy statute be reviewed and updated to align with current best practices.

The TDAE committee met with Laura Cyr, Maine DOE Federal and State Legislative Specialist and Rulemaking Liaison when she reviewed [LD 1851 CH 128](#): Truants and Dropouts Guidelines. We understand that this is a [routine technical rule](#), which means it does not require additional legislative oversight once it's filed with the Secretary of State.

The TDAE Committee has offered to support and participate as a stakeholder in updating this statute.

Future TDAE Committee Activity 2024

Solicit more diverse input

TDAE Committee membership is primarily made up of individuals whose characteristics and life experiences are similar. There is little diversity among Committee members. In order to better understand the needs of all those in our communities throughout Maine, we recognize the experiences of people of color, people in the LGBTQ community, refugees and immigrants, people living in poverty and homelessness and others must be included in our work. While the committee's make up is part of state statute, we have the option to ask others to join us during work sessions. We have started to invite students to our work sessions and would like to increase the number of youth involved. We will work with the DOE and others to identify and invite individuals from our underrepresented groups to join us for input to the work we are doing.

Data deep dive

The committee will continue to deepen its understanding of the data available and what it tells us about different areas of the state. While we were able to look at trends and statewide information, it is important to recognize that Maine has many different characteristics based on the location and economies of each district. By taking the time to look at statewide and regional data, we expect we will be able to offer recommendations designed to address issues students face in varying locations.

Conclusion

A trend worth following is the impact of the Covid-19 school closures on these educational success indicators. 2021 showed a significant increase in the percentage of chronic absenteeism and truancy. The four-year adjusted graduation rate is a lagging indicator. Increases in absenteeism and truancy will most likely manifest in future graduation rates.

The TDAE Committee is committed to focusing on priorities that positively impact truancy, dropout, and graduation rates in Maine school districts while developing and supporting alternative education pathways, including high school completion through adult education. The goal is to make recommendations that are practical, sustainable, actionable. The recommendations found in this report are the result of many hours of volunteer work by a group of professionals dedicated to finding solutions for Maine students who often do not have a voice to represent them.