

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Aspirations Survey of Maine High Schools: Results

December 2013

Maine ranks 11th of the 50 states for on-time high school graduation, but we are only average for college-going and college completion. College costs are growing much faster than inflation, and student debt is rising sharply. Yet the economic payoff to a college degree relative to a high school diploma continues to increase. With the goal of learning about how these trends influence Maine students' college aspirations and intentions, this year the Mitchell Institute worked with Great Schools Partnership, Maine Community Foundation, and MELMAC to develop a survey of Maine high school principals and guidance counselors. The survey results summarized in this report suggest some of the best ways to support high aspirations for Maine's young people and their educational communities.

In June and July 2013, we received 155 survey responses:

- Respondents work at 108 different high schools—representing 84% of Maine's 129 public high schools.
- 16 responses are from staff at Career and Technical Education (CTE) Centers—representing 50% of Maine's 28 CTEs.
- 89 survey responses are from school counselors—57% of the total;
- 55 responses are from high school principals—35% of the total; and
- 11 are from CTE directors—7% of the total.

Key Findings

- 1. Maine educators report that their communities encourage and value college education, but there is significant regional variation.**
 - 89% agree (including 31% that strongly agree) that a college education is valued in their school's community. Agreement ranges from 75% in Hancock County to 100% in Cumberland County and Midcoast Maine.
 - 88% agree (38% strongly agree) that their school's community encourages young people to consider going to college. Agreement ranges from 71% in Western Maine to 100% in Cumberland, Midcoast, and Washington County.
 - Agreement that there are better jobs within the community for young people with college degrees ranges from 25% in Hancock County to 94% in Cumberland County.

- 2. College-going graduates are perceived as less likely than peers to stay in the local area.**
 - While 75% of educators agree that there are better jobs in their community for people with college degrees than those with only a high school education,
 - 84% believe their graduates who *do not* go to college are more likely to stay in the local area after high school than are peers who go to college.

3. **Many educators believe that communities should address aspirations earlier.**
 - While more than three-quarters (77%) say that either elementary or middle grades is the ideal time to begin addressing college aspirations, only about one-half (49%) say their communities actually start addressing college aspirations before high school.

4. **Exposure to college campuses and job-shadowing are the top two experiences educators wish they could provide more for students.** When asked for 'blue-sky' thinking about effective actions to encourage aspirations, many educators also expressed a need for more guidance staff, financial aid counseling and application assistance, and better college-prep curricula in high school.

5. **Educators prioritize four main factors in college preparation as follows:**
 - 1) Academic preparation; 2) Character traits; 3) Family support; 4) Financial literacy

6. **College completion rates are overestimated by educators.** On average, educators predict that **55%** of their graduates will complete a college degree within six years. For all Maine high school graduates in 2006, the actual six-year college completion rate was **37%**.

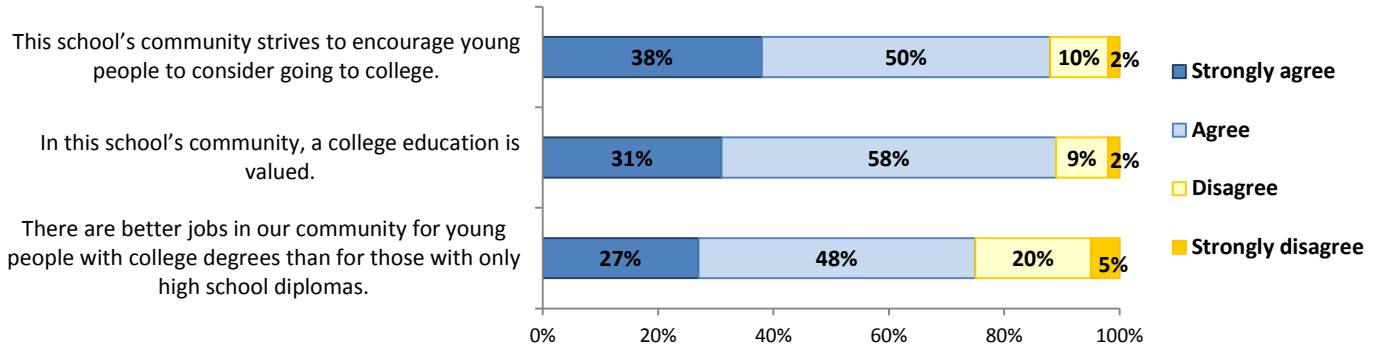
7. **96% of respondents are interested in having Mitchell Scholars return to their schools to meet with students.**

Our survey results suggest that, to better support Maine students' aspirations, we need to:

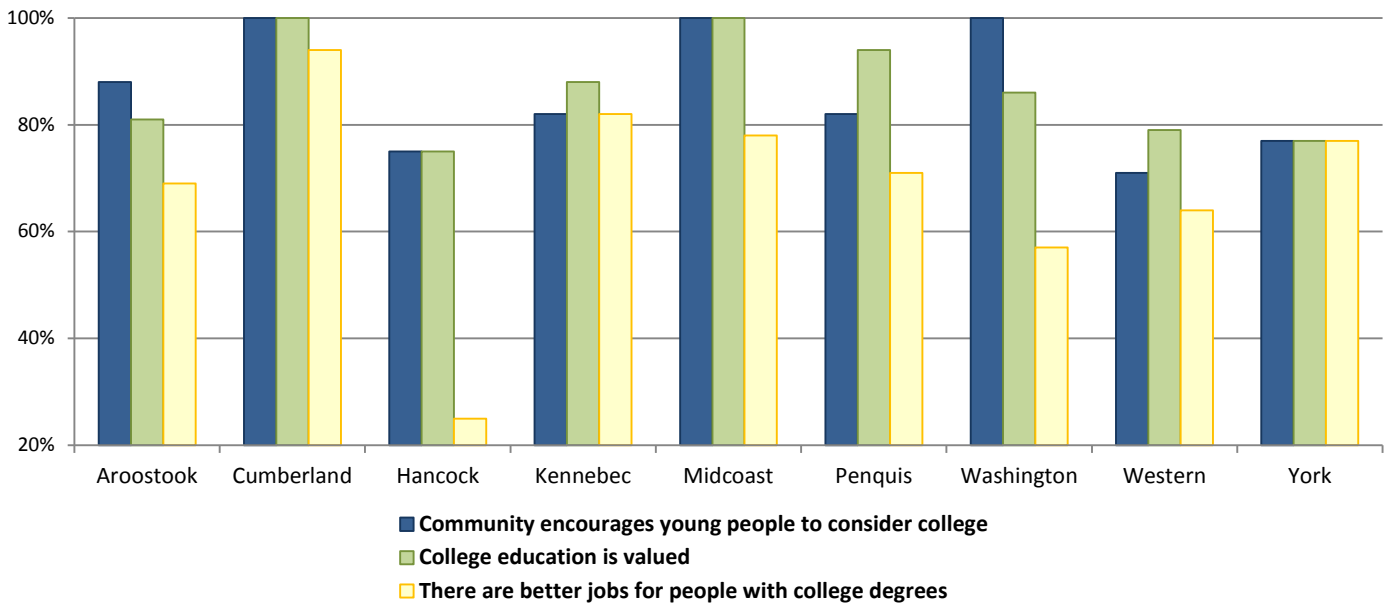
- More clearly demonstrate the connections between postsecondary education and the labor market both at home and beyond, and
- Start earlier to help students shape their plans for the future.

Community Attitudes about College

There is widespread agreement that Maine schools and communities value and encourage college education, but these attitudes vary across and within Maine regions, as shown in the second chart below. Particularly in more rural areas, educators are less likely to agree that there are better jobs locally for college graduates. (See Appendix for a list of high schools by superintendent region).



Educator Perceptions of Community Attitudes about College, by Maine Superintendent Region



Superintendent Region	% of Educators Agreeing or Strongly Agreeing:		
	This school's community encourages young people to consider college.	In this school's community, a college education is valued.	There are better jobs in the community for those with college degrees
Cumberland	100%	100%	94%
Mid-Coast	100%	100%	78%
Washington	100%	86%	57%
Aroostook	88%	81%	69%
Kennebec	82%	88%	82%
Penquis	82%	94%	71%
York	77%	77%	77%
Hancock	75%	75%	25%
Western	71%	79%	64%

The survey asked for examples of how communities encourage young people to consider college. Predominant elements from the open-ended responses are: informational events for parents and students; scholarships; college visits; college fairs; career and job exploration initiatives; and offering advanced or college course options.

Educators' descriptions of community efforts to encourage college aspirations include:

- "Many parents and guardians seek information regarding the college process...Our town has established a college savings program, contributing \$200 to a college fund, managed by FAME, for any child born here whose parent/guardian opens an account."
- "Our community has strong business/education partnerships, including a funded position to foster business/education partnerships in order to raise student aspirations...Our community offers approximately a half million dollars in scholarships to our graduates each year."
- "Our community has voted to approve budgets that allow us to prepare students well for college placement and have authorized millions of dollars of improvements to the physical plant, making our high school a more attractive and welcoming facility to attend."
- "The community is seeing that there are no jobs...and in order to compete outside the community, students need some form of postsecondary education."
- "The school community takes many steps to encourage students, as do some of the service organizations in the area. Examples include regular attendance in a career planning class, college visits, on-the-spot acceptance activities, and individual help with FAFSA completion."
- "There is strong parental support for students to continue their education beyond high school, which in turn creates a supportive environment when the school runs programs for encouraging students to continue their education."
- "We work collaboratively with local businesses, hospital, retirement homes, university and elementary school to plan job shadowing experiences and unpaid internships for students throughout the year. Students learn through these experiences the educational training required for the occupations they observe."

Descriptions from Career and Technical Education Centers include:

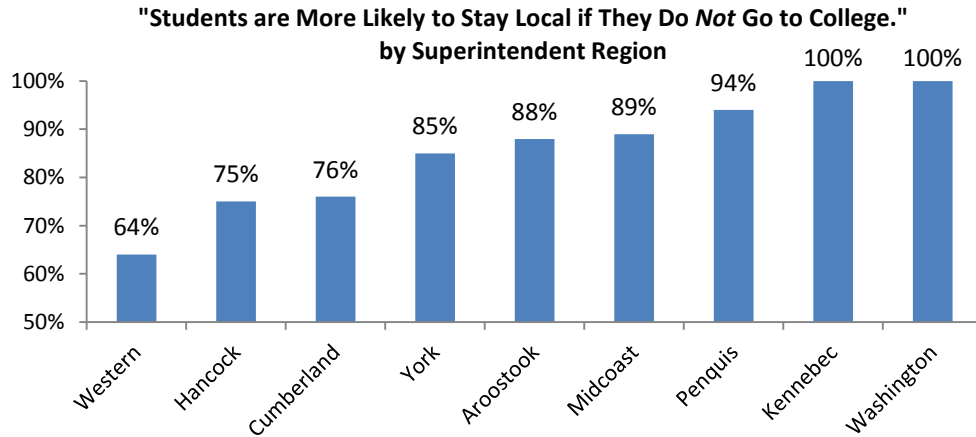
- "I would like to stress that four year colleges are not the only post-secondary gateway to better economic opportunities for our youth. For many of our students, community colleges and certification programs are the perfect next step."
- "Our school always informs our students that college is not an option, it is a requirement to better understand the field of employment they have chosen."

Respondents who disagreed that the community encourages college aspirations commented:

- "Our school strongly agrees, but our community and parents do not project the same beliefs."
- "There are so many families that have no post-secondary experience that I do not believe the overall culture is one that effectively promotes the idea/goal of college. There are also many jobs that do not require college education and therefore many businesses/employers do not promote the notion of college. Some do. Overall the message is mixed."
- "There is a real mix in this community regarding the value of a college education. Approximately 20% of the adults in our community have an associates or bachelor's degree themselves. Those families who have already had college experiences support others going to college, but first generation families are very skeptical and scared of the prospect."

Going to College and Staying Local

The survey asked whether students are more likely, less likely, or equally likely to stay in the local area if they do *not* go to college, and the overwhelming majority of responding educators—84%—indicate that their students are more likely to stay local if they do not go to college. 12% indicate that students are equally likely to stay local whether or not they go to college, and only 4% say that students who go to college are more likely to stay local than those who do not. Educators in Western Maine, Cumberland and Hancock Counties are less likely to believe that student who don't go to college are more likely to stay local, compared with 100% of respondents in Kennebec and Washington Counties, as shown below.



College Enrollment Data and Completion Predictions

About three-quarters (76%) of educators indicate that their school provides counselors and teachers with college enrollment data on recent graduates.

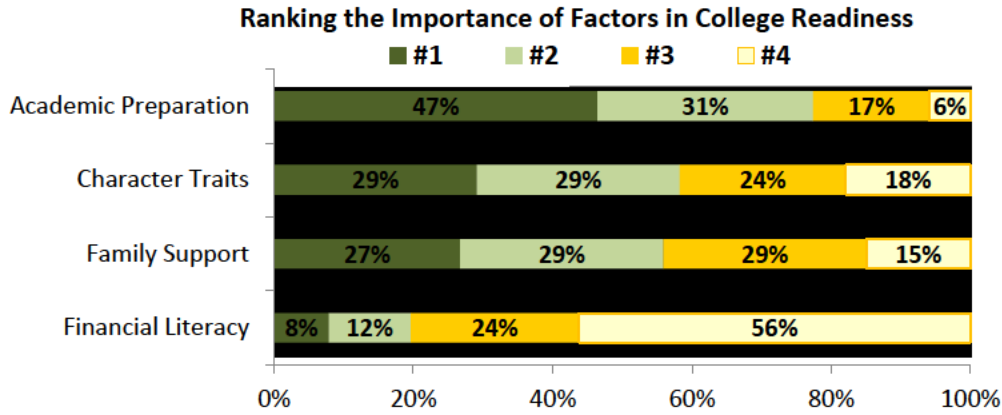
On average, educators predict that 55% of their graduates will complete a college degree within six years. For all Maine high school graduates in 2006, the actual six-year college completion rate was 37%.

College Readiness

The survey presented four factors in college readiness, and asked respondents to rate whether they consider each a major factor, minor factor, or not a factor in college readiness. More than 90% of respondents rated academic preparation and family support as major factors in college readiness, closely followed by character traits (86%). Financial literacy is considered a major factor in college preparation by three-quarters (75%) of responding educators.

	Major factor	Minor factor	Not a factor
Academic preparation	93%	7%	0
Family support	92%	8%	0
Character traits (e.g., resilience, grit, self-control, social intelligence)	86%	13%	1%
Financial literacy (e.g., understanding loans, interpreting a financial aid award...)	75%	24%	1%

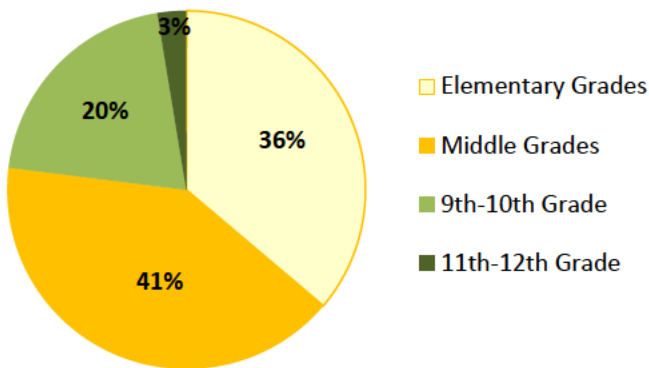
Respondents then ranked the relative importance of these four factors in college preparation. Academic preparation received the most number one rankings, from 47% of educators. Character traits are rated the top factor by 29%, and family support is rated number one by 27% of educators, as shown below.



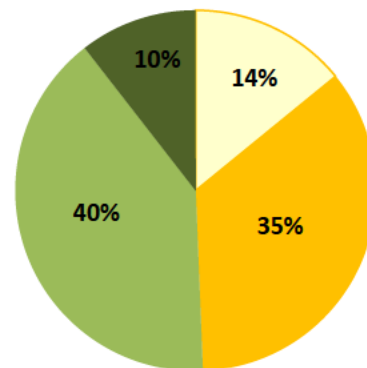
When to Begin Addressing Aspirations

Respondents indicated both the most effective time to begin addressing college aspirations at school, and when their school district actually begins to address aspirations. While more than three-quarters (77%) of educators say that addressing aspirations before high school—in either the elementary or middle grades—only 14% report that their school district begins addressing aspirations in the elementary grades, and 35% begin in the middle grades (see the following charts).

Most Effective Time to Begin Addressing Aspirations



Aspirations are Actually Addressed



Existing Aspirations Programs and Resources

The survey asked about existing programs and resources in schools, and also asked whether these efforts have a positive impact on student aspirations. FAME and MELMAC grants, Jobs for Maine’s Graduates, and Upward Bound were listed, along with an open-ended “other” category. The most common program is MELMAC grants, with about 60% of respondents indicating their school has

one. Other programs offered by educators include dual credit or early college courses, Talent Search, and advisory groups that focus on career and college planning.

Aspirations Program	Respondents with program	% with program reporting that it has a positive impact on aspirations
MELMAC grant	59%	93%
Jobs for Maine’s Graduates	41%	72%
Upward Bound	41%	89%
FAME college access challenge grant	39%	70%
Others	39%	65%

Regarding resources within the school, 61% of respondents said that they have a dedicated counselor for career and college planning, 45% have a program to connect recent graduates with current students, and one-third (33%) have an aspirations lab (space dedicated to supported career and college planning).

96% of respondents indicate that they would be interested in having Mitchell Scholars from their school return to share their college stories and advice with students.

Students’ Top Career Goals

The survey asked educators to estimate the most popular career goals among their graduating students. The five most popular responses were:

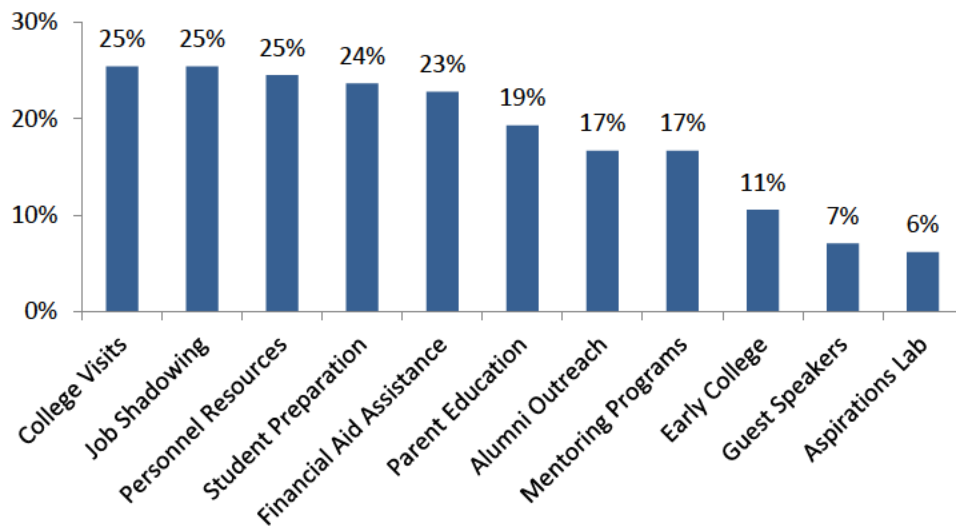
- Health careers (64% of respondents)
- Science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) field careers (35%)
- Education (29%)
- Business (27%)
- Technical trades (22%)

Other prevalent responses include: Make a decent living (19%); Find a job (17%); Obtain a college degree (10%); Environmental field (9%); Be passionate about their career (7%); Criminal Justice (7%); Liberal Arts (6%); Public Service (6%); Have an impactful profession (4%); Stay in the area (4%); Athletic field (3%); Leave the area (3%); Psychology field (3%); Hospitality (2%); and Entrepreneurship (1%).

Aspirations Wish Lists

The survey concluded with an open-ended question asking for respondents’ best one or two blue-sky thinking ideas about the resources or actions that would be most effective in encouraging student aspirations. Some of the most popular responses included college visits, job shadowing or internships, and more personnel resources.

Blue-Sky Thinking: Most Common Suggestions



Selected descriptions of blue-sky thinking ideas about effective resources and actions to encourage aspirations include:

- “A forum where students who have graduated college and are now in the workforce discuss their college years: what they learned, their preparation for college and life, advice for success.”
- “A network of volunteers from various professions willing to take students for job shadows and internships, so that they could be exposed to other professions, other than those they see on a daily basis.”
- “Access to technology is an obstacle for our students. We would like a computer laptop cart so that students can check out a computer and take it home to complete applications and do college options research. Many students have dial up service at home, so a wireless connection would have to be provided as well.”
- “I would like every HS student get \$5,000 for their first year of postsecondary education or training, plus one year of counseling to support them through the trials of that year. I would like to have a statewide resource of summer jobs that align with students' career plans so that employment opportunities in the state of Maine would be ensured.”
- “I would like more students to experience college courses and gain confidence in their suitability for college. I would also like students to have more internship-type experiences to make them aware of the realities of the world of work and the necessity of higher education.”
- “I would love to access grant money to fund a stipend position to assist me in finding and securing quality job shadowing experiences for ALL students. Additionally I would like to access money to stipend teachers or other community members to officially mentor each graduate during the first year of college. Indeed we do summer and fall follow-ups, but my wish would be for two emails or phone calls per month two face-to-face support meetings. I think this plan could be the intervention so many of our first-generation students are missing.”
- “I would really like to have the money and personnel to start doing parent education regarding aspirations/goals/study habits with parents of elementary students.”

- “It would be wonderful to have another guidance counselor who could work with 9th & 10th graders on career exploration and college prep ... I would also love to have high quality training/info on future careers.”
- “Money for college and an easier to navigate college system—students get so overwhelmed trying to sort out college paperwork and FAFSA forms, etc. Even after 20 years’ experience I sometimes find it frustrating.”
- “Once kids begin school there should be yearly career exposure with projects, field trips and direct contact with professionals built in to all curricula. A paradigm shift needs to occur ... changing the way we communicate with and invigorate the minds of the kids.”
- “Virtual tours of colleges; student presentations; expand dual enrollment offerings; bring college professors to the high school to teach classes; overnight college stays”
- “We would very much like to have a staffed aspirations lab and also additional staff to provide mentoring for struggling students. We would like to have money to take students to various colleges to see students like themselves that are being successful.”

Survey Respondents’ Additional Comments

We included space for any additional comments about aspirations or the survey itself. Comments include:

- “College is not a panacea. One-size-fits-all devotion to this goal has probably hurt as many students as it's helped.”
- “I'm not sure if college aspirations are the goal on its own. Ask most high school students what they are going to do after HS graduation and they'll say go to college, but they don't know how to do it or aren't willing to do the work to get there. They assume it is just the next step like going from middle school to high school, even those with a poor academic record or who can't pass the Accuplacer. They don't know what they want to go to college for, or if it is a realistic plan both financially and academically.”
- “I wish surveys like this would incorporate certifying training programs that provide job skills for young people. Also, training through the military is not recognized and for some kids, this works best.”
- “Student motivation is a tough issue, especially among boys. Their experiences have not yet demonstrated the competitiveness of the workplace and the true meaning of a job paying \$10 an hour.”
- “Students need more financial and emotional support. They are really sweating college costs.”
- “There is so much emphasis on college that students who do not want to go have very few options or programs...they would like to do other things but feel compelled to play the college game. How about some money or programs for students who would like to start their careers entering the workforce - and then go to community college to get certifications?”
- “We need a lot more academic support for our students. Ours is a CTE school with almost 40% of students having an IEP...Most come to us with below grade level math and reading skills, yet we get no special ed funds. The students who want to attend CTE are still often looked down on by many, including high school administrators and guidance counselors...Many are demoralized by the time they reach 9th grade. We need to find multiple pathways for students, go to a standards based grading system, and have lots of supports for students who are struggling or who get behind.”

Appendix: Maine High Schools by Superintendent Region

Superintendent Region	High Schools	
Aroostook	Ashland Community High School Caribou High School Central Aroostook High School East Grand School Easton High School Fort Fairfield High School Fort Kent Community High School Hodgdon High School Houlton High School	Katahdin High School Limestone Community High School Madawaska High School Presque Isle High School Southern Aroostook Community School Van Buren District Secondary School Washburn District High School Wisdom High School
Cumberland	Brunswick High School Cape Elizabeth High School Casco Bay High School Deering High School Falmouth High School Freeport High School Gorham High School Gray-New Gloucester High School Greely High School	Lake Region High School Mount Ararat High School Portland High School Scarborough High School South Portland High School Westbrook High School Windham High School Yarmouth High School
Hancock	Bucksport High School Deer Isle-Stonington High School Ellsworth High School	Mount Desert Island High School Sumner Memorial High School
Kennebec	Carrabec High School Cony High School Gardiner Area High School Hall-Dale High School Lawrence High School Madison Memorial High School Maranacook Community High School Messalonskee High School Monmouth Academy	Mount View High School Richmond High School Skowhegan High School Upper Kennebec Valley High School Waterville High School Winslow High School Winthrop High School Wiscasset High School
Midcoast	Belfast Area High School Boothbay Region High School Camden Hills High School Islesboro Central School Medomak Valley High School	Morse High School North Haven Community School Oceanside High School Searsport High School Vinalhaven High School
Penquis	Bangor High School Brewer High School Central High School Dexter Regional High School Forest Hills Consolidated School Greenville High School Hampden Academy Hermon High School Mattanawcook Academy	Nokomis High School Old Town High School Orono High School Penobscot Valley High School Penquis Valley High School Piscataquis Community Secondary School Schenck High School Stearns High School
Washington	Calais High School Jonesport-Beals High School Machias Memorial High School	Narraguagus High School Shead High School Woodland High School

Superintendent Region	High Schools	
Western	Buckfield High School Dirigo High School Edward Little High School Leavitt Area High School Lewiston High School Lisbon High School Mount Abram High School Mount Blue High School	Mountain Valley High School Oak Hill High School Oxford Hills High School Poland Regional High School Rangeley High School Spruce Mountain High School North Spruce Mountain High School South Telstar High School
York	Biddeford High School Bonny Eagle High School Kennebunk High School Marshwood High School Massabesic High School Noble High School	Old Orchard Beach High School Sacopee Valley High School Sanford High School Traip Academy Wells High School York High School
Not in a Superintendent Region	Erskine Academy Foxcroft Academy Fryeburg Academy George Stevens Academy John Bapst High School Lee Academy	Lincoln Academy Maine Academy of Natural Sciences Maine Central Institute Maine School of Science and Math Thornton Academy Washington Academy

Note: Staff from highlighted schools responded to the aspirations survey.