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School-Community Partnerships in Maine

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School-Community Partnerships in Maine



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Overview of the Study

Why was this study conducted? The Maine State Legislature commissioned the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) to conduct a study to identify schools or districts that are leveraging community resources through partnerships to expand the services they provide to students, families or staff, and to describe those programs and partnerships, as well as the strategies and challenges associated with forming and sustaining partnerships of this type. MEPRI focused this study on how partnerships are supporting the physical, mental, and social health and wellness of students and their families, given that these have been areas of growing concern for Maine schools and education policymakers in recent years and even more so during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What do you need to know to put this study into context? With growing recognition that students' academic achievement is supported by their health and social wellbeing, there has been increased effort to support the needs of the whole child and his/ her family, both prior to entry into formal schooling and beyond. A variety of models for “community schools” and partnerships between schools and community or regional organizations have emerged as strategies to leverage existing resources to expand wrap-around services and supports to students and their families. Supports provided by community schools or through partnerships might target needs such as: food security, housing assistance, legal services, health and wellness, parenting supports, early childhood education, youth development activities, after-school programming and crime prevention.

A community school approach might take the form of a single school as the hub of services in a community, or the model could encompass an entire school district. There is no single, preferred model for community schools or for school-community partnerships. The Coalition of Community Schools and other groups define the concept as “public schools that partner with families and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for students' school success” (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018). Key to this approach is the integration of programs and services to address the needs of the whole child and to engage families and the community in that effort. The Coalition and other groups outline four key elements for community schools to create conditions for students to thrive. This framework includes: “1) integrated student supports, 2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, 3) active family and community engagement, 4) collaborative leadership and practices” (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018). Supporting and sustaining partnerships takes time and a structure to support coordination and communication.

Research and evaluation of community school partnership projects across the US (Coalition for Community Schools, 2003; Johnston et al., 2020) have primarily focused on urban school settings, with less attention on rural schools. Findings include positive impacts for students, families, schools and communities. Student impacts included: improved math and reading achievement, improved attitudes about school, improved behavior and attendance, on-

time grade progression, improved self-esteem and feeling connected with adults. Positive impacts for families and schools included: improved communication between families and schools/ teachers; improved family stability in terms of basic needs such as housing, food and employment needs; and increased family attendance in school meetings; and increased sense of responsibility for child’s schooling. Positive impacts for communities included: increased community use of school buildings; greater awareness and access to community agencies and services; increased engagement of community members and students in school and community service.

The Maine Department of Education (MDOE) has supported the development of both “community schools” and partnerships, first through a limited seed grant program starting in 2016 that funded two of the districts highlighted in this report (MSAD 17 and RSU 34, and more recently through a federal grant to support the expansion of wrap-around services and partnerships for districts in the Pre-K expansion program.

What did we learn from the study? This study examined six diverse school districts in Maine that have successfully formed partnerships between their districts and community or regional organizations to expand supports to students and their families that go beyond academic support to include health, mental health, social services and other supports. In addition, the MDOE continues to encourage and support districts’ adoption of partnerships to support the transition of young children into the early school years and beyond, using a comprehensive and integrated approach to engaging with families and community partners. A summary of key findings and themes includes the following:

Factors motivating schools or districts to form partnerships

- Desire to address challenges associated with student and family poverty including: food insecurity, low access to health and mental health services, at-risk student behavior and academic challenges
- Desire to engage with families and build relationships earlier, prior to school entry, and need to welcome and integrate new immigrant families with complex needs
- Desire to implement high quality early child education programs and Pre-K, and to increase capacity to serve all families seeking to use these programs
- Desire to increase school readiness for young children and improve transitions across Pre-K through first grade
- Desire to expand supports and enrichment opportunities for students and ELL/ new immigrant students in particular, both during school hours and in wrap-around programs
- Desire to implement culturally responsive practices to build trust with diverse groups in the community and with families wishing to participate in programs and services
- Desire to increase college aspirations for high school students, high school completion, career awareness and internship experiences
- Desire to support and strengthen equity for students and families

Range of programs and services provided through partnerships

- **Academic programs** to: track individual student progress; provide interventions earlier; implement or expand Pre-K programs such as partnerships with Head Start; support enrichment, after-school programs and fieldtrips; provide supervised remote learning facilities for students during COVID-19; provide early college course taking in high school; and provide individual mentoring on preparation for college and careers
- **Healthcare services** for students, families and staff: partnering with hospitals or other healthcare systems to provide low or no-cost access on school site or nearby, for urgent and routine medical care, testing for infections, referrals, vaccinations, family planning services, telehealth services via video-conference, health education for students and families; dental health services
- **Mental health services** for students, families and staff: partnering with hospitals or other healthcare systems to provide low or no-cost access on school site or nearby, screenings and assessment, referrals, telehealth services via video-conference, individual and small group counseling, substance abuse and prevention programs, and adult education
- **Juvenile justice intervention programs** for at-risk youth for alternative sentencing that includes counseling, community service and other education programming (RSU 25)
- **Other social services** for families: home visits by a family liaison or social worker; referral to other social service programs for assistance with income, housing, job training, parent education; substance abuse and prevention treatment programs; citizenship classes; translators and community outreach coordinators; life coaches for students

Challenges in forming or sustaining partnerships

- Identifying potential partners
- Having fewer partners available in rural, remote areas
- Identifying funding sources, sustaining programs after state or federal seed grants end
- Technical assistance with needs assessment or on-going evaluation
- Professional development needs requested: learning about robust models or frameworks for community schools and partnerships, early childhood education and development, trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning
- Need to budget for staffing at school and district levels to coordinate partnerships, provide outreach and assistance to families
- Communication between organizations that partner on programs, cultural and language diversity in communities that impact communication efforts
- Navigating FERPA/ HIPPA rules around privacy and information sharing, and early child program licensure

Successful strategies for supporting partnerships

- Having strong superintendent and district leadership to identify and initiate conversations with potential partners
- Including local colleges and universities as partners, including technical education (CTE) students as program staff or mentors for younger students
- Identifying shared goals and concerns among stakeholders for partnership
- Aligning partnership efforts with district goals, priorities and strategic plans

- Seeking broad-based stakeholder input to assess community needs, identify resources to address needs, develop plans, and provide on-going communication and accountability
- Forming a partnership collaborative or team of stakeholders to advise and adjust partnership efforts over time
- Leveraging available local, regional, state and federal funding and other resources such as donated or in-kind contributions and charitable funding
- Inviting program partners to participate on school teams to track progress and interventions needed for at-risk youth
- Using adult mentors and life coaches for 1:1 mentoring of at-risk youth
- Use of remote, videoconferencing technology or telehealth services to bring programs, courses or services to students and communicate with families
- Creating staffing positions for day-to-day management and coordination of family outreach and partnership efforts, and having both school and district level staff positions
- Evaluating partnership efforts and programs, refocusing efforts and changing programs as needed
- Increasing inter-agency collaboration for improved state-level coordination and communication to support districts' efforts

What did we conclude overall from the study? The school districts profiled in this study successfully formed partnerships with a wide variety of community organizations and individuals, supported through various sources of public and private funding, to address the physical health, mental health, social and academic needs of students and their families. An important goal of these efforts was to address the needs of families in poverty and at-risk youth. A broader goal was to engage with and form stronger relationships with families before students enter school, to improve participation in early child education programs and on-going academic success for students. Districts also worked to integrate many of their partnership programs into the school program and school day.

Districts used a variety of strategies to develop and maintain partnerships. One important strategy was intentionally selecting partners that could support district goals and priorities. Another important strategy was forming a coalition or team structure to engage with diverse stakeholders in the work of identifying community needs, and creating and monitoring programs. We noted an absence of program evaluation for some of these efforts, suggesting a need for more staff or technical assistance to support that effort.

The primary challenges in districts' effort to partner with other organizations included the time and effort needed to nurture partnerships, difficulty of finding potential partners in rural areas, and funding to sustain these efforts over time. Some districts received professional development and technical assistance from the MDOE while others were doing this work on their own.

What are some potential implications for education policy and/ or practice? The findings from this study suggest some potential implications for state and local education policy, as well as for local efforts to develop and sustain partnerships. We outline a few of these implications in this section.

Alignment of Partnerships with District Priorities

- While there are many potential partnerships and programs districts might pursue, strategically selecting a few that most closely align with and support current district goals and priorities can help districts achieve greater impact in those high need areas, without over-stretching administrative and staffing capacity.
- Districts should pursue partnerships and programs that best fit their unique community needs, based on their local demographics and available partners. A generic model for school and community partnership would not work everywhere. Rather, it is a locally crafted endeavor, requiring time and effort to fully engage with diverse stakeholder groups in the community, find common interests, and share expertise and resources for a common goal.

Guidance and Technical Support

- Districts involved in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion grant program appreciated the external technical support, with funding from a federal grant, to guide their efforts in developing and implementing a partnership plan. In essence, they had access to experts to coach their school teams. The MDOE is continuing to build its online resources for supporting community-school models. This would be an efficient way to share needs assessment tools, guidance and resources on forming and funding partnerships, and tools for evaluating programs. The Coalition for Community Schools also provides many valuable resources on their website: www.communityschools.org

Professional Development Needs

- While the six districts featured in our case studies did not mention having access to professional learning about community-school models or partnerships, the 13 districts participating in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion grant program appreciated having this knowledge to inform their efforts to expand outreach and programs for families prior to kindergarten. Thinking about the needs of the whole child means engaging with families earlier and in different ways, and creating new structures within the school and district to support that effort.
- Areas where those districts saw a need for professional development included: early child education and development for staff and administrators, trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning for students.

Funding

- While districts used state and federal grants and donations to support programs for students and families, these sources are typically seed money to start programs. Sustaining these efforts will take more reliable funding streams, most likely through a combination of state and local education funding. The state might start by adding funding to the EPS funding model for a district level community partnership coordinator and full or part-time family liaison positions for schools. For smaller districts, schools might be able to share a family liaison staff position. For larger districts, a full-time family liaison position may be needed. Over time, this investment is likely to pay off with improved

student participation in early childhood education and Pre-K programs, improved student academic success, stronger relationships with families as their children transition into schools, and improved student and family physical and mental health, all of which can lead to improved economic impacts for the state as well.

- Regional collaboration can be encouraged by the state through seed grants and local efforts to share resources and programs across school districts. In particular, larger districts might share access to programs and academic courses for students through cooperative agreements and the use of video-conferencing and telehealth services. Partnerships with local colleges and universities can support college aspirations and course taking for high poverty or immigrant high school students. Technology can play a larger role in supporting resource sharing across districts and partners, and this may help to address the disadvantages that small, rural districts have in finding partners.

Coordination

- Improved coordination at state, regional and local levels can support districts' efforts to develop and sustain partnerships and programs that address a broad spectrum of students' and families' needs. The inter-agency coordination and collaboration between education and health and human services at the state level is an important step in supporting districts' efforts and identifying and eliminating some of the potential challenges or barriers districts and their partners experience. One aspect districts struggled with was how to share relevant information about a student to better coordinate support and services while adhering to privacy rules. Additional funding and staff may be needed to support inter-agency coordination, as well as expanded support from the state for districts statewide.
- Districts also identified the need for coordination at the local level, through partnership collaboratives or teams as well as with staffing positions in districts and schools to help coordinate programs and services to families.

Communication

- The inter-agency coordination described at the state level should lead to improved communication between the education and health and human services agencies, and better communication with school districts.
- Rural districts experienced more challenge in identifying potential partners. Districts in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion grant program and First 10 initiative suggested the state provide assistance in sharing a directory of organizations that could be potential partners for school districts. They also suggested the development of a statewide network of districts implementing school-community partnerships to share ideas and their own successful models with this effort.

What methods were used to conduct this study? This report presents the findings of a qualitative research study of school-community partnerships in Maine, focusing on six diverse school districts from various regions in the state. In-depth interviews were conducted in fall 2020 with district administrators and leaders of community organizations about their partnerships and

the programs and services they provide to students and their families. In addition, one MDOE staff member was interviewed about the agency's effort to encourage school-community partnerships and wrap around services for districts implementing Pre-K programs. A total of 12 interviews were conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews lasted approximately an hour. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix A. Data analysis included development of detailed, descriptive case narratives to understand the context for these partnerships and how the programs are implemented. Broad findings across the six cases are also presented in this report to generate implications for policy and practice.

How robust are the findings? The selected sample of six district cases are diverse in terms of district enrollment, geographic location, student demographics, the types of partnerships they have developed and their particular challenges in finding community partners. Districts were selected after one of the co-researchers conducted a comprehensive study of district websites for all school districts in Maine, and the sample includes both districts that received seed grants from the MDOE to support partnerships since 2016. In-depth interviews were conducted and audio-recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Narrative descriptions of the programs and networks were shared by email with participants to confirm accuracy. The research team examined the findings across all six cases to identify the dominant themes and reach consensus on the conclusions and implications from the study.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a qualitative research study of school-community partnerships in Maine, focusing on six diverse school districts from various regions in the state. The report was one of eight planned projects conducted this year by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) as part of the annual workplan commissioned by the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs in the state legislature. The legislature tasked MEPRI with identifying schools or districts that are leveraging community resources through partnerships to expand the services they provide to students, families or staff, and describing those programs and partnerships, as well as the strategies and challenges associated with forming and sustaining partnerships of this type. In designing the study, MEPRI focused in particular on how partnerships are supporting the physical, mental, and social health and wellness of students and their families, given that these have been areas of growing concern for Maine schools and education policymakers in recent years and even more so during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

Emergence of the Community School Concept

As more pressure has been put on schools to increase academic achievement for all students (Gerstl-Pepin, 2007), there has been an increasing recognition by some school districts of the necessity of meeting the needs of the whole child, including meeting children's basic needs (and, increasingly, their families) through services provided by the school (Sanders & Lewis, 2005). Often referred to as "wrap-around" services, or integrated social services, several "community school" models and frameworks have been developed over the past decade nationally that seek to leverage the daily contact that schools have with youth to solve challenges related to fractured service delivery (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin & Pedro, 2011), while also promoting community-mindedness amongst children, parents and educators (Keth, 1996). Within these models, schools often serve as a hub for supports related to food security, housing assistance, legal services, health and wellness, as well as parenting supports, early childhood education, youth development activities, after-school programming and crime prevention (Coalition for Community Schools, 2003).

It should be noted that while many schools are generally considered to be “community schools” because they are located centrally within their communities, and some even have the words “community school” in their school names, and most schools are also a central “hub” of their community by hosting a variety of events outside of the regular instructional school day, not all schools incorporate a breadth of wrap-around services and programs, as well as other structural and cultural practices for outreach to families, that would meet the spirit of the community school model or approach examined in this study.

While there is no single, preferred model for providing the type of wrap-around services typically found in a community school or for school-community partnerships, schools embracing this model typically share some common features. The Coalition of Community Schools and other groups that advocate for the community school model define the concept as “public schools that partner with families and community organizations to provide well-rounded educational opportunities and supports for students’ school success” (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018). As described earlier in this section, this approach includes the idea of integrating programs and services within the school and community to address the needs of the whole child and to engage families and the community in that effort. The Coalition and other groups outline four key elements for community schools to create conditions for students to thrive: “1) integrated student supports, 2) expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, 3) active family and community engagement, 4) collaborative leadership and practices” (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018).

Research on Community Schools

The Coalition for Community Schools has published highlights of evaluation findings from 20 different community school evaluation projects from across the U.S. (Coalition for Community Schools, 2003). While some of the evaluation data came from rural or suburban schools, most of the data came from schools located in urban centers across the US. Broadly, the evidence from these 20 evaluations supports the conclusion that community schools have positive outcomes for students, their families, schools, and communities. Student impacts included: improved math and reading achievement, improved attitudes about school, improved behavior and attendance, improved self-esteem and other outcomes. Positive impacts for families and schools across the 20 studies included: improved communication between families and schools/ teachers; improved family stability in terms of basic needs such as housing, food and

employment needs; and increased family attendance in school meetings; and increased sense of responsibility for a child's schooling. Positive impacts for communities included: increased community use of school buildings; greater awareness and access to community agencies and services; increased engagement of community members and students in school and community service. A more recent study of New York City's Community School Initiative conducted by the Rand Corporation (Johnston et al., 2020) found that this school reform effort had positive impacts for: student attendance in all grades, on-time grade progression, reduction of disciplinary incidents, students' sense of connectedness to adults, and teachers' perception of shared responsibility for students' success.

Implementing a community school model or approach requires time and effort on the part of both school and community leaders to cultivate, develop and maintain partnerships and monitor how well those efforts are working. Schools may partner with private or non-profit groups as well as local or regional governmental agencies. For schools that have a large number of partnerships or programs to manage, it may be necessary to hire a coordinator to ensure adequate staffing capacity, coordination of effort and oversight. Public or private facilities and space may need to be shared among partners for services and programs, such as space for food pantries, food preparation, recreation and after-school activities, health or mental health services, parent computer classes, etc. Partners also need to identify funding to cover the costs for these programs and services (which may include both public and private funding, grants and health insurance programs), and how to compensate partners for their services (Horsford & Sampson, 2014; LeBer & Branzei, 2010). Goals for partnerships must be defined and data gathering systems set up in order to evaluate the success of the collaborations (Nowell, 2010). Schools in rural and remote locations (such as islands) may also face barriers related to distance from potential partners (Miller, Scanlan & Phillipppo, 2017), while schools in more urban areas may have a wider array of potential partners nearby.

School-Community Partnerships in Maine

In 2015, the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) Commission issued a final report (Millett & Hubbell, 2015) supporting an initiative to encourage development of a community school model in Maine schools, as outlined in legislative bill LD 956 "*An Act to Create Community Schools*," which was ultimately incorporated into the state budget (Maine Public Law 2015, Chapter 267). Beginning in 2016, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE)

funded seed grants from discretionary funds to two school districts, MSAD 17 and RSU 34, to fund pilot projects that supported development or expansion of partnerships between the schools and community organizations to improve services to students and families. MEPRI provided a suggested format for applications for seed grants and reporting information (Fairman & Johnson, 2016). Districts applying for the seed grants were required to conduct a needs assessment, a community resources assessment, and provide a plan for how the additional funding would be used. They were also expected to evaluate these new efforts, however additional funding was not identified for that purpose.

Guidance to districts on what constitutes a community school or partner was specified in statutory language (Maine Public Law 2015, Chapter 267) and was incorporated into the MDOE's seed grant application guidelines in 2016. That language offered a broad definition of "community schools" stating that "a 'community school' is a public elementary or secondary school that: A. Participates in a community-based effort to coordinate and integrate educational, developmental, family, health and other comprehensive services through community-based organizations and public and private partnerships; and B. Provides access to services under paragraph A to students, families and the community, such as access during the school year to services before school hours, after school hours and during the weekend, as well as access to such services during the summer" (MDOE, 2016). This definition is largely consistent with what we described earlier from the research literature in focusing on the elements of integrated services, support for student learning, and engagement of families and community members. The definition does not specifically include the fourth element of collaborative leadership. Further, the guidelines enumerated a wide variety of potential community partners that schools might join with in providing services to students and families. This approach provided considerable flexibility for schools and districts to meet local needs and build on the resources available in their communities or region.

The current MEPRI study describes six district cases where school districts have been successful in establishing strong partnerships with a variety of local and regional groups to address identified academic, social, health and other needs for their students and families. That sample includes the two districts that received seed grants from the MDOE to support community partnerships. In addition, we interviewed a MDOE staff member about the agency's efforts to encourage school-community partnerships through its support of districts implementing

Pre-K programs. Our goal is to contribute to the growing literature on these types of partnerships that support whole child development, as well as an understanding of how these partnerships vary across diverse communities. This study also begins to assemble a rich source of information about specific school-community partnerships in Maine, which has not been systematically studied or documented before. Currently, there is no centralized collection of information or listing of districts or schools that utilize community partnerships or those that fully implement a “community school” model or approach as outlined in the research literature.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study research design to explore and describe diverse school-community partnerships in Maine, with a focus on programs and services supporting physical, mental, and social health and wellness for students and families. This methodology allowed for in-depth interviews with school district leaders and community organizations to provide detailed and accurate descriptions of the factors that motivated their partnerships, the goals of the partnerships, how specific programs were implemented, perceptions about impacts from these efforts, and perceptions of both challenges and successful strategies that support these types of school-community partnerships. The study received approval through the Institutional Review Board at the University of Maine.

It should be noted that our selection of district cases was guided by the breadth of partnerships these districts have implemented to address health, mental health and social welfare needs for their students and families. These are districts that have successfully developed and implemented a variety of partnerships, making an effort to integrate services into the school curriculum, program and facilities to better support the needs of the whole child. This study does not attempt to evaluate those programs or measure the impacts, nor to determine to what extent the schools in these six districts meet all four criteria for conditions that support a community school model, as outlined by the Coalition of Community Schools and other groups (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018). Rather, the purpose was to describe different types of partnerships, the kinds of needs they are addressing, and the perceptions of districts and community partners on the challenges and successes of those partnerships.

The study sample included six school districts, two of which had received the MDOE seed grants to support partnerships with community organization. Four additional districts were added to produce a sample that was diverse in terms of district size, geographic location, student

and community diversity, and types of programs and service they had developed in partnership. Table 1 below provides a description of these districts. Based on a comprehensive study of Maine school district websites conducted in summer 2020 by one of the co-authors of this report, 12 districts were identified as potential candidates for inclusion in the current MEPRI study. District leaders were contacted by email and phone and asked to describe their school-community partnerships. Based on that information, a total of six districts were selected for final inclusion in the study.

Table 1. Description of Selected Districts for this Study

District	NCES description	PK-12 District Enrollment (2020-21)	PK-12 Schools in System	% Eligible for Free/Reduced lunch	% English Language Learners	% Students identified as White
MSAD 17 (Oxford Hills)	Distant town/ rural	3,192	8 elem., 1 middle, 1 high school	54%	0.4%	93%
RSU 25 (Bucksport)	Distant rural	1,049	2 elem., 1 middle, 1 high school	54%	0.3%	92%
RSU 34 (Old Town)	Small suburban/ rural fringe	1,456	3 elem., 1 middle, 1 high school	51%	1.1%	89%
Calais	Remote town	614	1 elem., 1 ms/hs, 1 technical	51%	4.4%	87%
Lewiston	Small city	5,178	5 elem., 1 middle, 1 high school, 1 technical	63%	27.8%	53%
Portland	Small city	6,522	10 elem., 3 middle, 3 high schools, 1 technical	53%	24.2%	53%

Data sources: Maine Department of Education Data warehouse, district enrollment 2020-21
 NCES=National Center for Educational Statistics, data on ELL from 2018-19
 NCES, data on race, free/reduced price lunch from 2019-20

District leaders familiar with the initiation or oversight of school-community partnerships were contacted by email with information about the study and a request for an interview. After we learned about which partners were providing support for health services and programs, we also invited a community organization leader to participate in an interview to provide their perspectives on those partnerships and programs. Interviews with district administrators (n=7) typically included the district superintendent and, in one case, a director of special education and partnerships. Two district administrators were interviewed for the Portland district, a director of clinical and behavioral supports, and a director of community partnerships. Additional interviews were also conducted with leaders (n=4) of community organizations that provide health, mental health or and/ or social services and programs to students and families. Those organizations and job roles are described within each case narrative. In addition, we interviewed one MDOE staff member about the agency's efforts to encourage the use of a community-school model and expansion of wrap-around services for students and their families in 13 districts that have implemented Pre-K programs. In total, we conducted 12 interviews for this study.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom video-conferencing and were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Interviews ranged from 35-80 minutes each, and most were about one hour in length. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were provided to participants ahead of time, and the interviews covered all relevant topics. Interview transcripts were read closely to develop a descriptive, narrative profile of each program using a common structure. Narrative descriptions of the programs and networks were shared by email with participants to confirm accuracy. The research team examined the findings across all six cases to identify the dominant themes and reach consensus on the conclusions and implications from the study.

Description of the Cases

Narrative descriptions of each of the six district cases of school-community partnerships are provided below. These descriptions have a similar structure. They begin with a general description of the district and community including factors that may present challenges for academic achievement, health or social welfare. Next, we describe the range of different kinds of partnerships these districts have formed with various community and regional organizations. Following that, we focus on particular partnerships that provide programs or services related to

physical, mental or social health and wellness for students and families. We describe what motivated the districts to develop these partnerships, how they were initiated and funded, how the programs or services are delivered, and perceptions about impacts for students and families. Finally, we describe participants' observations about the challenges and successful strategies related to developing and sustaining partnerships, and the importance of continued funding for community partners, and their suggestions related to education policy. The cases are presented starting with smaller districts and ending with larger districts.

Calais

The Calais School Department is located in Washington County, Maine. Classified as a remote district, the CSD is home to one elementary, middle and high school, serving approximately just over 600 students this school year (2020-21). The district is also home to the St. Croix Regional Technical Center, serving students from Calais, Eastport and Woodland, as well as the Calais Alternative School, which services students with severe disabilities. Superintendent Ron Jenkins reports that 60% of the students served by the district reside in Calais, while a small number of students come to Calais from Bering, Charlotte, Alexander, Perry and Robbinston, as well as Pleasant Point and Indian Township, each serving the Passamaquoddy Tribe. Just over half of the students are eligible for the lunch subsidy and about 4% are identified as English Language Learners.

Overview of District Partnerships

The school district engages in a number of partnerships that broaden the types of educational experiences the district can provide to students, as well as providing wraparound services for students in the tradition of a community school. One such partnership is between the school department and the Cobscook Community Learning Center (CCLC) to host an alternative, experiential learning high school program. Although the program only enrolls 14-15 students each year, it is able to serve high school students that have not been successful in traditional high school settings all around Washington County. One interesting feature of this partnership is that while it enjoys school board support, there are years when no students from Calais are enrolled in the CCLC program, as student need for the program varies from year to year. Some of the benefits that the district receives for supporting the program is the tuition subsidies that it brings in, as well as the additional enrollment numbers. CCLC is also able to take advantage of the extended special education supports that the district has made available to support the unique

needs of students who enroll in their program. Superintendent Jenkins stated that in a state with very few truly alternative high school programs, this partnership is a point of pride for the district in being able to provide real alternative opportunities for high school aged youth.

With regard to wraparound services, the district partners with the Blue Devil Health Center to serve students in grades 7-12. The health center is located on the campus of the middle and high school. The superintendent reports that 70% of students take advantage of this resource to meet their physical health needs. One of the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic has been continuing to ensure access to this resource in the context of first, school building closure, and second, the hybrid return to school in fall 2020. However, COVID-19 has also provided the impetus for new district partnerships to meet students' physical, social and emotional needs. The district is now partnering with Sunrise Opportunities, located in Machias, which provides services to adults who need supports for addressing emotional and substance use disorders, including counseling, case management, housing support, and employment services. In addition to providing some of these supports for students, the partnership has also allowed additional Pre-K opportunities, as the district has moved one of their Pre-K programs to the Sunrise campus to support parents with distance learning.

In addition to providing students access to physical health services, the Calais School Department was selected to participate in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services Project AWARE grant made available to states by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Through this five-year grant, the school would have received funds to provide mental health and counseling services to CSD students above and beyond what their full-time guidance counselor was able to provide. However, this project was terminated because of a conflict between Maine's state marijuana laws and federal laws on illegal substances. The district has been able to use some of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to provide these services in the wake of COVID-19, however, in partnership with Indian Health Services (IHS). In addition to Passamoquoddy students having access to these services, CSD non-Native students are, through this agreement, also able to take advantage of some of the comprehensive services offered by IHS. One of the factors which facilitated the development of this partnership was the Calais superintendent's unique work experience: Prior to becoming the CSD superintendent, Jenkins had spent many

years working with the Bureau of Indian Education and was familiar with the ways in which they provide services for students.

The district has also partnered with organizations like Healthy Acadia, funded through a Partnership for Success grant from the Maine Office of Substance Abuse and Health Services, in order to provide health education to students and families through movie screenings, discussion groups, and workshops. Healthy Acadia's Maine Partnerships for Success mini-grant program has been targeted towards partnerships that support substance use prevention programs in Hancock and Washington Counties.

Partnership Deep Dive: Blue Devil Health Center

Founded in 2004, the Blue Devil Health Center is a full service health center that is located on the campus of the Calais Middle and High School. The partnership with the Blue Devil Health Center has two components: first, students are able to receive routine screenings, such as eye exams and hearing tests, on an annual basis through the health center. The health center is also able to provide other preventative care services to students, such as vaccinations, with the permission of parents. The center also provides mental health services such as counseling and behavioral health services. No students are denied care due to inability to pay, according to the website.

The health center is also able to provide urgent care through a doctor on-site several hours each week. While the doctor volunteers his time for the health center, he is able to see students and make referrals as appropriate to specialists. The services that the doctor provides is in addition to the two school nurses that are on staff at the district. During COVID-19, these nurses and the volunteer doctor have played a key role in screening students for COVID-19, responding to case reports, and ensuring that the school has stayed in compliance with CDC guidelines. The health center has stayed open during the 2020-2021 school year by appointment to both parents and students.

The Center also provides health education to students at the school, including topics such as bullying and health for youth of all gender identities. The Center supports a team of students, referred to as the TAG team, in developing public health messages for their peers and presenting these through skits, public service campaigns, and through other media. According to the superintendent, the health center has been an important resource to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ+) youth in the Calais region. With support from the health

center and teachers in the district, students have been able to engage in projects exploring the ways in which the district could better support the needs of LGBTQ+ students and have presented to the superintendent on those policy issues. As a result, the district has explored partnerships with other outside agencies to better support the needs of LGBTQ+ students, both within the curriculum and extracurricular programs. Superintendent Jenkins suggested that acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities is still a struggle in the greater Calais region, as evidenced by some pushback from within the community around flying a rainbow flag in the gym during winter basketball season. However, the superintendent felt that the partnership with the health center supported a strong foundation in addressing these issues of bias.

The future of the Blue Devil Health Center was placed in jeopardy in 2017 when the Legislature cut \$5 million from the Fund for a Healthy Maine. This fund, which supported 15 school-based health centers around Maine, was an important part of the fiscal sustainability of the Center, providing \$46,200 in support. The school board and school administration were able to find the funding to continue the services that the Center provides to the Calais community. At the time, the superintendent vowed to “go door to door” and “beg” to keep these important services available to the school community (Gallagher, 2017).

Reflections on Challenges and Needs

Many of the partnerships in the Calais School District grew out of an obligation to meet student needs more comprehensively or adequately. In particular, students needing alternative or specialized services often needed to be connected with regional resources in Machias and other surrounding communities. The partnerships with Calais Alternative and the Cobscook Community Learning Center, for example, were both partnerships spurred by the academic and behavioral support needs of students in the district.

In reflecting on what was necessary to build and maintain district-community partnerships, Superintendent Jenkins emphasized the importance of having a school leader who was highly engaged and connected with the community in order to be able to overcome some of the challenges to finding local resources in a remote district. In his words,

You've got to pick the things that you know are important and then you've just got to go out and ask or look for them or find the people that can do it...I find people that are excited about, I may have an idea -- a connection with the Rotary Club, or something. I don't necessarily go out and talk to the Rotary Club. I find a Rotary Club member. I find

somebody that we have, that's excited about knowing that the Rotary Club. And they find somebody within the club that wants to help the school.

In rural areas, with fewer local resources, it was important for district leadership and the community to work together to identify potential partners and build the relationships necessary for the partnership to grow. It is also important for the superintendent to go to bat for these services when fiscal resources are tight.

RSU 25 (Bucksport)

Regional School Unit 25, located in Hancock County, enrolls just over 1,000 Pre-K-12 students in four schools that serve Bucksport, Orland, Prospect, and Verona Island.

Superintendent Jim Boothby, who has been in his post for 15 years, feels Bucksport has adapted itself to meet the economic challenges associated with the closing of the mill. Boothby explained, "It's a community that is embracing its heritage, but doing it in a way that's looking to meet the needs of families and retirees in our current environment." According to Boothby, members of the town's Economic Development Committee, which includes the district superintendent, "identify the school system as the number one economic development engine for the community. So they are very adamant that they want quality programming. They want opportunities for families." To cover a decline in revenue following the mill closure, the town drew on reserve funds to maintain the educational programs.

When the district consolidated to form a regional school unit, they developed a mission, vision and strategic plan with wide input from members of the four communities. These documents have evolved but continue to guide the district's choices about where to seek community partnership collaboration and specific programs on which to partner.

Overview of District Partnerships

Superintendent Boothby has actively pursued multiple partnerships between the school system and various community organizations. Boothby explained, "We just play a role in the overall fabric of a community, so we cannot work in isolation. And we have resources that can be leveraged, to help other groups." One of the first school-community partnerships in the district that continues today is with the Bucksport Bay Healthy Community Coalition, formed in 1995 by the same four towns comprising RSU 25, to address public health and social needs. The community coalition model came out of a broader effort of the World Health Organization in the 1990s to address local health needs through local partnerships. The Coalition's governance

committee includes broad representation from the communities and the school system. One of the first efforts of the Coalition was to access federal and state assistance as a region underserved for dental services, which allowed the Bucksport Regional Health Clinic to access funding to expand dental care to youth.

The Coalition has also helped the school district connect to resources and funding to address several educational needs. For example, the Coalition helped the school district establish full-day Pre-K and kindergarten programs, and helped families connect with early childhood resources and social services. The Coalition also supported an after-school program for teens called Challenging Choices to strengthen relationships with adult mentors, support social skill development and healthy decision making. Further, the Coalition partnered with the Bucksport Police Department to implement an alternative sentencing program for youth under 21 with minor offenses. Through the Youth Diversion Program, youth engage in counseling and community service rather than automatically going into the corrections system. This program helps youth examine their choices and goals and form more connections within the community. More recently, the Coalition helped the school district make connections to participate in a grant-funded study targeting students at risk of dropping out of school through a program called Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR). The district provides time for teachers and staff to meet twice each week to review the academic, social and behavioral progress of high school students and to identify if academic interventions, counseling supports or outside services are needed, with communication to parents. Based on the positive impacts of this intervention strategy, the district expanded the program beyond 9th graders to all high school grades. Superintendent Boothby credits this effort in helping to improve students' social and academic improvement as well as increasing the district's graduation rates from about 75% to over 90%.

To address the nutritional and food insecurity needs of students and families, the district works in partnership with local churches and a grocery store through a collaborative effort called Bucksport Community Concerns (BCC). One effort of the BCC is running a food pantry located in a local church, and helping the school district to provide about 40 backpacks with food to elementary and middle school students on Fridays. Other efforts of the BCC include collecting clothing for families and helping community members access heating fuel assistance.

According to Boothby, "purposeful planning for the future and success" has recently been boosted by a new five year grant from the MELMAC Education Foundation to be

administered by Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG) with the goal of developing a pilot program to support students' aspirations from Pre-K through high school. The grant will support two staff positions working out of the district office to connect with families, business and community leaders, who will collaborate to help students develop personal learning pathways and eventually internship opportunities for junior and senior high school students. In a district where poverty is a challenge with 55% of the students qualifying for the free/ reduced lunch subsidy, and many parents have not attended college, this intervention seeks to improve students' economic and educational opportunities.

Partnership Deep Dive: Bucksport Regional Health Center and Healthy Acadia

Through its partnership with the Bucksport Regional Health Center, the school district has improved access to an array of healthcare services, particularly for low income students. Services are provided to students on a sliding fee scale at the Health Center next to the high school or within their schools, and include basic dentistry, primary healthcare, mental health and substance abuse counseling. Staff also have access to mental health services. The health center also provides crisis planning and grief support to schools as needed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some mental health services were provided remotely to students and staff. Boothby reflected on the benefits of this healthcare partnership which has deepened within the last seven years,

We were able to develop a relationship where the health center provides counseling in all of our buildings. All four of our buildings. And it's [free]. We don't pay for it. It's funded directly through parents' insurance. But what we do is we provide them a space to work so they can meet with the kiddos without disrupting their school day.

Another partnership that provides health and mental health services to students and families in the school district is with Healthy Acadia, a regional health coalition funded by federal grants that serves communities across the Hancock and Washington Counties. Healthy Acadia has a designated liaison who coordinates with districts to provide health programs, resources and staff training. One program targeting at-risk behaviors is a smoking and substance prevention program that has been integrated into the district's physical education and health classes.

Reflections on Challenges and Needs

Student and family poverty is a continuing challenge in the district, with over half of the students qualifying for the lunch subsidy. Some families are reluctant to accept assistance. Boothby described how important the school-family relationship is for encouraging families to accept assistance that is offered. “We focus on building those relationships at the school level. And working with them to help them, if they identify there’s a need, we can provide an opportunity for them, to help them with that need.”

Another challenge the district faces in connecting students with outside agencies and healthcare services is figuring out how to navigate FERPA and HIPPA laws and regulations that limit the kinds of information that can be shared. Superintendent Boothby shared how the district approaches this challenge, “It all goes back to the mission and vision and the strategic plan.” He advised, “Whatever you do, make sure you connect it, directly, to what the mission and vision in the strategic plan would be.”

In reflecting on the development of community partnerships, Boothby advises other district leaders to enter partnerships fully prepared with a clearly identified concern or need, and then to help others in the community understand the concern and to be part of the solution, using coalitions to leverage outside resources, rather than working in isolation to solve problems. He further explained, “If you can create an environment where they see the problem the way you see it, and they are willing to be a partner in the solution, and they eventually will adopt the plan to be theirs, and not yours, then you’re set up for success.” As superintendent, Boothby has taken an active leadership role to encourage collaboration between the school system and the community, and he considers it crucial to not only initiate these types of partnerships but also to cultivate and sustain them so they become part of the “cultural changes” that “live beyond individuals.” He views the superintendent’s role as being a “linchpin and a connecting point for the community” for “creating opportunities and finding connections.” He also works with principals and staff to encourage them to help identify opportunities for partnerships. Boothby pointed out that school-community partnerships are a reciprocal relationship. “. . . you need to focus on being a catalyst . . . to bring people to the table, or else be willing to go to their table and assist with their challenges. Because it has to be a two way street.” As an example of this, Boothby described how the district has partnered with Bucksport for the past eight years to produce nutritious meals to seniors three days per week served at the senior center. The district is

able to leverage its food purchasing power to reduce costs, its staffing and license to prepare food.

Mary Jane Bush has worked as a volunteer/ paid staff with the Bucksport Bay Healthy Communities Coalition for over 20 years, helping to coordinate some of their activities. She agreed that a major strength of the Coalition is that this model involves multiple stakeholders from the four participating communities. “We’ve had people from our business community, our faith community, from healthcare, education, the community at large, municipalities.” She described this collaborative effort this way: “I think [it’s] bringing everybody to the table and really looking at all the assets that exist in the community, and coming to an understanding of what are the priorities.” She noted the leadership of the RSU 25 superintendents over the years in reaching out to community organizations to “build partnerships in both early care and education programs.” Bush also described how periodic surveys conducted by the municipalities and the school district provide data to help identify the needs and gaps for healthcare or other areas. Finally, Bush noted the importance of both inter-agency coordination at the state level, such as with the Children’s Cabinet initiated by former Governor King, and sustained funding from the state and other partners to support collaborative initiatives for long-term positive impacts. She noted a trend of partially funding programs or providing very limited startup funding which leaves effective programs vulnerable despite strong evidence of increased needs in communities for health and mental health services.

MSAD 17 (Oxford Hills)

MSAD 17 is a rural school district in southwestern Oxford County, with an enrollment of over 3,100 Pre-K-12 students from eight communities in the Oxford Hills region. The population includes a diverse mix of income levels and occupations. Superintendent Rick Colpitts has been in the district for 14 years and feels the community has adapted well to changing economic times after the closure of mills in the 1970s, through the emergence of new kinds of creative entrepreneurship. Colpitts observed, “These communities evolved, and created new business opportunities and new industries and new connections. We have a hospital. We have cottage industries.”

The district was formed when eight towns merged their school systems in 1963, and they have since developed a shared identity and show strong support for their schools. Colpitts noted, “Somehow these communities have managed to find a way to rally around a common thing, and

that common thing has been education.” School budgets generally have strong voter approval, and the district has established both full-day Pre-K and full-day kindergarten programs.

Challenges for the district include a high rate of poverty with over half of the students eligible for the lunch subsidy, substance/ opioid abuse, and students who experience trauma, all of which contribute to increased student behavior and academic challenges. The Oxford Hills Scholarship Foundation, created in 2008 with a substantial donation from a community member, currently supports about 200 students with \$1 million in scholarship funds annually to attend college. The fund is overseen by a board composed of community members and the superintendent. Colpitts shared, “The challenge for us is to make sure that those students that we graduate can come back and support this community for the next generation.”

Overview of District Partnerships

The school district has forged partnerships in the state and region to improve student access to healthcare and social services. Colpitts feels his district is fortunate in having some local and regional organizations including a hospital with whom to partner. Colpitts explained, “I think what we're trying to do is leverage opportunities within the federal and state government that allow us to provide greater access.” Within the last 20 years, they have added health clinics to the middle school and high school, staffed with nurses and doctors from Stephens Memorial Hospital, and secretarial support from the district. The clinics primarily serve students and families who lack primary care providers.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a district health coordinator initiated a partnership with an organization that provided dental hygienists who performed basic dental checkups and fluoride treatments for students in need. Currently the group provides oral check-ups and dental sealants, using students working under supervision on their CNA certification in the technical education program.

To tackle the problem of food insecurity in the region, the district has partnered with Good Shepherd to set up food pantries in most of their schools for the past four years, they have provided backpacks with food to students at all schools over the past four years, and they established a summer meal program. Access to clothing was also identified as a need in the district. Educational technicians at the high school initiated a program where staff acquire donated clothing and students can select clothing on a virtual online store. Local churches operate a program to provide coats to community members. District staff donate money to

purchase shoes or clothing for students in need, and donate to a reserve fund to help families in crisis.

In the academic realm, the district has a long-standing partnership with Community Concepts in operating the district's Head Start Pre-K programs, as well as providing supports to families of Pre-K students that help them connect with social, financial, and other services. The district's major partnerships in both health services and Pre-K/ social services are described in more detail in the next two sections.

Partnership Deep Dive 1: Stevens Hospital and Western Maine Pediatrics

In fall 2020, partly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Colpitts reached out to the president of Stephens Memorial Hospital to request help with telehealth services for families. Through this new partnership, Western Maine Pediatrics provides telehealth services for elementary students supported by federal funding and donated support from the hospital. Telehealth care provides triage or initial medical assessment of students and access to medical practitioners by videoconference for initial diagnoses and referrals. There is a designated district physician from Western Maine Pediatrics and the organization can also help families connect with social services. Until this year, the smaller elementary schools had relied on a part-time nurse for one half day per week, the school secretary or principal to handle students' sudden illnesses or injuries, as is typical for many smaller schools in Maine. Colpitts explained how medical advice and referrals are provided through telehealth,

The student and the parent and the doctor can get online at the school. They can log in on a computer and the doctor can ask questions. The doctor could actually look at the child visually and ask the child questions. They can ask the parent questions. They can make a referral for testing. . . . It doesn't actually provide a direct service, except advisory, and helps to get them linked to medical assistance where it's necessary.

Partnership Deep Dive 2: Community Concepts

An important regional partnership in recent years supporting social, academic and other needs of students and families is with Community Concepts, which is part of a national network of nonprofit, community action program (CAP) agencies. These agencies were created through the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 as part of Johnson's war on poverty, and were funded through federal block grants and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009. Community Concepts is funded by a variety of state and federal agencies, private

foundations and non-profit organizations. There are ten such agencies in Maine. Community Concepts serves Oxford and a few other counties, helping families connect with 50 distinct programs and service agencies. Colpitts described their mission: “They're an agency that has a job of helping to lift people out of poverty, and to put them into positions of independence and self-sufficiency.”

Through this partnership, the district provides space and teachers for their full-day Head Start Pre-K program and Community Concepts provides educational technicians and staff who provide home visits for Head Start families. Colpitts emphasized the importance of building relationships with families that build trust and encourage families to communicate their needs with the liaison staff. “It's only because they built that relationship over a period of time. I think, when people feel you're coming in, you're not there to judge, and that's important.”

During the home visits, staff serve as family coaches share healthy parenting strategies and also provide information and referrals to help address other family needs. These needs might include helping with low income heating assistance (LIHEAP) applications for heating assistance, information on food and nutritional assistance, access to healthcare, mental health and behavioral health services or other social services, job coaching for parents, low income housing, financing for home buying, child abuse prevention and intervention. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Head Start staff visited families at home to deliver food, diapers and supplies, iPads and hot spots for connectivity, and provided virtual home visits. The agency trained teachers to delivered the Head Start program remotely. The school district also continued to provide meals to students at home.

The district was able to expand the home visit program to all kindergarten and first grade students in two elementary schools using a two year grant for community school programs awarded by the MDOE in 2017. This grant funded two Family Support Assistant positions. The district found over 70% of the kindergarten families qualified for additional social services and students' behavior at school improved after receiving services. The end of the state seed grant and limited district funding prevented continuation of the expanded home visit program.

The district also contracts with Community Concepts to provide mental health and substance abuse prevention counselors in the middle school and high school. Counselors see students who self-refer or are referred by school staff and provide screening and interventions that include small group counseling, parent education and family events at school.

This combination of district and agency expertise and resources through Community Concepts has strengthened the Pre-K program's support for students' social, emotional and academic development. Colpitts commented, "The partnership has opened up some doorways and provided us with greater continuity." Shawn Yardley, CEO of Community Concepts for the past five years, said, "Public school partnerships are critical, because schools can't be expected to do it all. So, how do you effectively connect the important people in the family's and child's life, in a meaningful way?"

Reflections on Challenges and Needs

Reflecting on what they've learned from developing and maintaining strong school-community partnerships, both the district and Community Concepts acknowledged that the relationship took time to build through continued conversation and openness to learn and adapt on both sides were. Colpitts, who sits on the board for Community Concepts, shared,

That's how that relationship grew. It just, it came from a number of years of sitting down together and having conversations about what we each do, what we find is important, and then what we can do to support each other to make sure it's happening, because we're all doing our best to raise people up.

Yardley of Community Concepts also viewed the partnership with MSAD 17 as a successful collaboration. He shared,

I think, whenever you do collaboration, there's a little bit of "some of ours, some of theirs", and we make it work together. . . . We're always looking to bring what we have to the table to support mutually beneficial programming and goals. And certainly, Superintendent Colpitts has been very open to those kinds of partnerships.

He also agreed with Colpitts that these kinds of partnerships take effort and good communication. Yardley explained, ". . . it takes building relationships and working through the differences. But we've made it work, and more, I think really successfully. . . . And it's all about communicating and having a mutual goal in mind."

While the district has been successful in establishing many types of partnerships to support students and families, Superintendent Colpitts indicated there are still unmet needs. He commented, "I think we're just dipping our toe. I think there's a lot more we could be doing to break down barriers for people to access services." One challenge he identified is the complexity

of working through the confidentiality and privacy rules (e.g., FERPA and HIPPA) that can restrict the sharing of confidential information about students or families across partnering organizations and staff. Colpitts explained, “It took us three weeks to get through the HIPAA/FERPA issues about telehealth.”

RSU 34 (Old Town)

Classified as a small suburb, RSU 34 is located about 20 minutes outside of a regional hub, Bangor, Maine, and is adjacent to the flagship campus of the University of Maine. The district serves the communities of Alton, Bradley and Old Town, and enrolls over 1,400 students. Ninety-three percent of students in the district identify as white, while 3% identify as American Indian. The district is directly adjacent to the Penobscot Nation’s sovereign territory on Indian Island, and therefore serves more Native American students than other school districts in Maine. The well-being of the district’s families has been deeply intertwined with the history of the mill in the community, which has changed hands many times in the last two decades with corresponding fluctuations in local opportunity for the area’s families. Just over half of the students are eligible for the lunch subsidy.

Overview of District Partnerships

Kimm Kenniston, the Special Education and Partnerships Director, described the district as serving a population whose social service needs have changed over time. The predominance of rental housing availability, she described, has meant that a significant portion of the district’s population struggles with transience. As a result, the district has tried to keep pace with these needs through innovative partnerships. Innovation is important to the district, she emphasized, citing the recent recognition of their curriculum director as the Maine State Curriculum Leader of the Year.

The district employs a full-time community liaison, funded through a five-year seed grant from the MDOE to support school-community partnerships. One major focus of this new position is RSU 34 family food security. The community liaison organizes a school-site food pantry, a farm stand for RSU 34 families with produce grown in the elementary school garden, and, during building closure associated with COVID-19, grocery bags for families. Additionally, she also coordinates a Children’s Fund that is sustained through local and staff donations. The children’s fund is designed to meet requests that might fall outside district services to meet basic needs of families, such as weather appropriate clothing.

The district has cultivated partnerships to provide a variety of needed services to students, including contracting with Northern Lights Health System, to have access to a full-time social worker. Prior to this partnership, the district contracted with a social worker three days a week, purely for disability-related social work services. The full-time social worker provides case management for students who have not been identified for special services, provides medication management services, and maintains connections with Acadia Hospital, a local resource providing in-patient and out-patient behavioral health services. The social worker has been an asset during COVID-19, the Special Education and Partnerships Director said, because of the ability to have them check on families and student attendance without it feeling punitive or authoritative, the way that it might if the building principal was doing the check. The Partnerships Director also emphasized that the direct connection to the Northern Light Health System was more valuable than contracting with an individual licensed clinical social worker because of the broader connection to the health system and the continuity of care for families. The NLHS affiliated social worker is able to provide the district with updates from Northern Lights and provide valuable beyond simply contracted services.

Additionally, the district has an extensive and multi-faceted partnership with the Old Town/ Orono YMCA. This partnership includes after-school programming opportunities for district students, as well as health and wellness partnerships. One of these partnerships includes a program called River Runners, funded by the Lerner Foundation, where students from 6th grade onwards participate in youth development activities designed to raise their future aspirations. This program is part of the broader Aspirations Incubator program funded by the Lerner Foundation which connects this site with other sites around the state doing similar work. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this partnership has been critical in helping families manage hybrid schooling, with off-school sites being set up at the YMCA for students who need supervision on their remote school days.

Partnership Deep Dive: Pathways

To specifically meet the mental health needs of students, the district has partnered with the Pathways program to extend their capacity to provide access to counseling and case management. The Pathways program provides both home and school-based counseling to students in partnership with many districts across the state of Maine. To be referred for services from Pathways, students first meet with the RSU 34 guidance counselor for their building. Based

on their assessment, the guidance counselor will either work directly with the student or refer the student to Pathways. Students who are referred to Pathways generally have needs that cannot be met by the guidance counselor. Costs for Pathways are either covered by a family's private insurance or through MaineCare.

The Special Education and Partnerships Director serves as the point person for coordinating the logistics of the partnership. The district offers office space in their buildings to five providers on their school campuses. The purpose of having counselors on site is to reduce the barriers that families may face to access these out-of-school services, while also cutting down on learning time disruption for students. In her words, "Even though we're close to Bangor, if you had to leave school to go to Bangor to an appointment, that was a real barrier." Prior to the partnership, students referred for mental health services typically needed to get appointments in the middle of the school day, spurring a host of logistical complications for both the school and the students' family. On-site services have virtually eliminated these complications. Additionally, Pathways is able to provide year-round service for students, whereas the district only provides services during the school calendar year. The Partnerships Director emphasized the importance of this continuity, stating, "A lot of our families, that support throughout the summer is very necessary."

The Partnerships Director also emphasized that the dual nature of Pathways had ancillary benefits to both families and the school. She elaborated on this, saying,

That support to the family, even though schools are very supportive -- it's still the school. So, you get that open communication with the family. And they may ask and share things of a clinical person that they don't with the school. I think, whether it's increased attendance, increased mental health . . . just that ability to participate in the instruction, because they're here, has definitely helped. And they see a lot of kids.

The increased ability of the mental health providers to communicate with families and pass that benefit along to the schools with family permission, as well as observe students in the school context provided a powerful opportunity to support student development in ways that were impossible when their services were provided off-site.

Reflections on Challenges and Needs

The Partnerships Director described the community as one that has "shifted over time" as the mill has closed and reopened under new ownership and at a different scale. Transient

students continue to make up a significant population within the district, with a large number of families choosing to double up to avoid homelessness. With the increase in transience, the district has seen an increase in demand for basic needs assistance and other types of support. As a result, the district has tried to build multiple partnerships to create a network of supports for students. The Partnerships Director emphasized that an important aspect of supporting many simultaneous partnerships was for districts to start small and grow slow. Staffing the partnerships and finding the right person can be a challenge. Additionally, districts need to consider the extent to which they want their partnerships to be directly connected to MaineCare, which can be a benefit or a hindrance to families accessing services, depending on the district's student population. She emphasized that RSU 34 has chosen not to pursue some partnerships that are too tied to MaineCare, because not all students have it and the billing system for the program is quite complex. In the case of the Pathways program, the billing is taken care of by the agency, which alleviates some of the burden placed on the district.

However, the approach that RSU 34 takes to partnership development does require pursuing other funding to support partnerships that will serve an expanded student population. To do this, the district relies on private donations, including estate planning and voluntary payroll deduction from staff to finance the Children's Fund (a fund set up to assist families with specific needs, such as holiday gifts, seasonal clothing, gas cards, and other emergency expenses). Pursuing these funds requires some active development efforts and commitment of central office time.

Lewiston

The Lewiston School Department is one of only five urban classified districts in the state of Maine and, therefore, a useful case for understanding how larger districts engage in multi-sited and multi-layered partnerships with their communities. Its enrollment is over 5,000 students PK-12, with five elementary schools, a middle school, a high school and a career and technical center. Like many other areas of Maine, the area was traditionally home to textile and paper mills, and today is home to many small businesses, two large health systems, as well as several local banks. The demographics of the community have changed considerably in the past three decades as refugees from Eastern Africa (primarily Somalia, but also many other countries) have made their homes in the city. In contrast with many districts in Maine, Lewiston has a higher proportion of non-White students (47%). Superintendent Jake Langlais reported that 40 different

languages are currently spoken within the district, leading to the need to expand the districts' capacity for translation and interpretation services, as well as services to support English Language Learners (ELLs). The percentage of students who qualify for the lunch subsidy is 63%.

Overview of District Partnerships

The school district has established many kinds of partnerships to meet the needs of the diverse cross-section of learners that they have enrolled. These partnerships include after-school programs run by the Boys and Girls club, the YWCA, the Root Cellar (a religious program), and TREE street youth (which grew out of the Refugee Assistance Program), as well as partnerships with several local daycares. In the context of COVID-19, these partnerships have been able to be expanded on remote learning days with cohorts of children attending one of these community partners so that parents have access to supervised care on these days and children have support for completing their schoolwork. These partnerships have been funded through the COVID-19 relief funds received by the district.

The district partners with St. Mary's Healthcare, as well as several other organizations such as Spurwink, to provide mental health services from within the schools. Over 20 providers have been given office space in both the middle and high schools in the district in order to meet the mental health needs of students in the district. The district also maintains memorandums of understanding with several local non-profits to come into the schools on a periodic basis to provide clinical services, including both counseling and other mental health services. Because some students need more intensive supports for social-emotional and behavioral needs, the district has built numerous programs and partnered with local organizations to resource these programs with clinicians who can meet these needs. In the context of COVID-19 school building closures and on-going social disruption, as student and family mental health needs have increased, the district has provided families of students not currently receiving services with phone numbers to reach out to Spurwink, Tri-County Mental Health Services, Connections for Kids, St. Mary's, and Health Affiliates if they are in need of counselling.

In addition to providing in-school access to these services, the district also partners with one of St. Mary's health clinics, called B Street, which is only a ten-minute walk from four of the major school buildings in the district. The convenient location of the clinic makes it easy for district families to access needed services at that location. In the wake of COVID-19, the district

is currently working on establishing a School Health Office, which includes two floating nurses serving all of the schools to address increased health needs related to COVID-19. This type of structure may be particularly important in a district like Lewiston which serves a large number of students of color. In Maine and nationally, COVID-19 infection rates have been higher in BIPOC populations (Schroeder, 2020).

The district also has the advantage of being located close to the small, private liberal arts college in their community, Bates College, and partners with the institution to provide unique educational experiences for Lewiston students and placements for pre-service teachers. Over 150 students from Bates work with students in the Lewiston Public School District each year as mentors, teaching assistants and coaches. Some of these programs are chapters of nationally established programs, such as Kids First or America Reads, through which college students focus on academic skill development with Lewiston students. Other ways in which college students engage to support whole child development in the district include volunteering with sports programs, after-school programs and community organizations which engage with the local schools.

The diversity of languages spoken at home creates unique challenges that must be overcome in order to support high-quality school-family relationships. One of the affordances of COVID-19 has been the introduction of Talking Points in the district, a service that provides real time language translation support to facilitate communication between teachers and families. Prior to the introduction of this service, paid for with money from the COVID-19 relief funds, teachers had been using Google Translate to communicate with families, which has limited accuracy and usefulness.

Funding for external programs is typically provided by external grants that the district applies for, or through special purpose programming. Some of the work is budgeted for at the district level using federal, state and local funding, particularly Title III funding (language instruction for English Learners). External grants tend to be from Maine or New England based foundations, such as the John T. Gorman foundation.

Partnership Deep Dive: TREE Street Youth

One high-quality example of a partnership maintained by the Lewiston School Department is the partnership they have with TREE Street Youth to provide the Next Step program at Lewiston High School. Next Step is a long-term collaboration between the Lewiston

School Department and TREE Street Youth, a community-based organization designed to support positive development, leadership, and skill-building for Lewiston’s children and youth. In speaking about the value of this partnership for the district, Superintendent Langlais said,

The executive director and I work closely together. She challenges me, I challenge her. She knows the ins and outs of our community, I know the ins and outs of the education system. And so we’ve built this really strong relationship.

The collaboration began when the district became interested in pursuing a design-focused grant that called for school districts to collaborate with community-based organizations. The partnership qualified for a planning grant that would financially support the cost of bringing a variety of stakeholders into the planning process. Together, TREE Street Youth and the Lewiston School Department entered into a design process to address the low rate of graduation in the district. They formed a design team, led by the high school principal and the executive director at TREE Street Youth, that consisted of representatives from the community organization, parents, youth, and district administrators. In the words of one of the TREE Street partners,

[It] was really focused on what are the constraints for kids getting through high school? And how do we solve for those constraints? Kind of the three that were clear is relevant curriculum, social and emotional supports, and are we addressing the social and racial inequities? Those are the things that kids said were their biggest barriers to not graduating.

One of the unique features of this design process, according to Superintendent Langlais, was the way in which the community organization was able to bring youth into the conversation with whom the school would otherwise not have access, including youth who had not completed their high school education or had chosen an alternative pathway. In the words of the superintendent, “that kid who has not found success at the high school . . . they’re not showing up to sit in a conference room with people like me . . . so that community connection was really helpful.”

The resulting program, Next Step, currently serves 25 students and is located within Lewiston High School. Three teachers are assigned to work these students, not only in the classroom but as bridges between the larger community and the high school. Students who are off-track for graduation are identified as early as their sophomore year to participate in the

program, but the program is also designed for students who find their high school unwelcoming and find themselves in frequent conflict with teachers and administrators. In addition to an alternative curricular experience, the program provides a kind of wraparound approach for students that would be difficult for the district to provide at scale, both because of the resources it would require and current district policies. As an example, Superintendent Langlais described how staff from Next Step are able to go to students houses to pick them up if they are unable to get to school on their own or if they miss the bus:

As part of our MOU with Tree Street, we have an on-site person that's directly connected to the school, that works as a life liaison, if you will. Works with the kids directly. Can do things that kind of school personnel can't. You know if a parent says, hey, my son missed the bus. Can you come get him? You know, school, sometimes we can, but we need a school vehicle and school staff, and we've got to follow all those rules. Where a life liaison, who's not a school employee, can be like, yeah, I'll be right there and I'll pick you up and I'll bring you to school. The primary focus of this individual is to make sure kids have access to the things that they need for life . . . So, they know their personal situation. They know who to call. They know when to call. They know what context to communicate within. And I tell you, the families, they need that.

Superintendent Langlais discussed the way in which the life liaison was able to provide tailored support to students that helped them troubleshoot issues around both physical and mental health, providing warm handoffs to practitioners with skillsets in both of these areas.

Both the superintendent and the TREE Street partner suggested that open and on-going communication was the key to sustaining such an intensive partnership between the district and an external organization. The design team continues to meet regularly, weekly or bi-weekly, to discuss the program, and program staff and assistant principals at the high school are in regular touch about students in the program. The design team has been split into the internal and external members of the design team to keep the administrative core of the program focused and able to make decisions, but with the ability to still involve a broad range of stakeholders in on-going discussions about the program. Future goals for the partnership include its expansion to serve a larger number of students, along with the possibility of connecting it with teacher preparation programs so that pre-service teachers could do student teaching in a school-based program that

has a focus on holistic youth development, in addition to academic achievement.

Reflections on Challenges and Needs

Superintendent Langlais reflected on the need for the Lewiston School District to bridge “between two very strong cultures that function amongst themselves” – referring to the white and historically French-speaking population and the new immigrant population including refugee families representing many cultures and languages. While its inclusion of these diverse communities has positioned the district to receive some resources from foundations and other philanthropic entities to support its role as a bridge, Langlais suggested that these resources were not sufficient to support the kind of exchange that he would ideally hope to see. “We’re growing, as a community,” he observed, and in the way that many communities in Maine hope to grow. However, the school must play an important role in integrating these two populations so that they feel like one community instead of two.

Perhaps because of this unique role, an important feature of the school-community partnerships developed in Lewiston was the attention given to who was at the table and had a voice in the development of the partnership. The planning grant support that provided for the Next Step program, for example, allowed the district to proceed in developing the partnership with the community slowly, creating a vision across organizations that allowed for strong communication and laid the foundation for shared governance of the partnership in the long-term.

Portland

Portland Public Schools is the largest district in Maine with over 6,500 students enrolled in ten elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools. Two schools are small island schools. As an urban, coastal port city, Portland attracts large numbers of immigrants and refugees from many different countries. In recent years, most refugees have been arriving from African nations where children and their families have often faced poverty, trauma and interruption of formal schooling. Refugee families arrive at different points of the school year with many economic, health, mental health, and social needs, and their children often attend schools close to the shelters or transitional homes where families are residing temporarily. Student mobility among schools is high. The influx of immigrants means that some schools have higher percentages of students living in poverty, students designated as ELL and students working below grade level. In some schools, there are over 60 languages other than English

spoken at home by students and their families. The district employs home-school liaisons called Parent Community Specialists for interpretation/ translation services to communicate effectively with families. Developing strong school-community relationships may require creative strategies.

Yet across the school district, there is considerable variation in the socio-economic status and needs of families and communities served by local schools. School demographics vary specifically in terms of student poverty levels (ranging from 19% to 74% students eligible for the lunch subsidy), racial and ethnic diversity (ranging from 20% to 69% non-White students), percentages of ELL students, and the academic and other needs of students and families. This diversity requires both a district-wide approach to and coordination of partnerships as well as local efforts that can meet the unique needs of individual schools and the communities they serve.

Overview of District Partnerships

Since the 1980s until about 2016, school and community partnerships were coordinated by an organization called Portland Partnerships, governed by a board with stakeholder representation, and individual schools had community coordinators. Local businesses or organizations adopted individual schools to support the cost of after-school programs or other special programming. Given challenges including budget cuts and the other time demands for school staff and principals, the district took on more direct coordination of these partnerships. Grace Valenzuela was named Communications and Community Partnership Director in 2016 to oversee partnerships broadly and school community coordinators who work one day a week in each school. Valenzuela is also director of the district's Multilingual and Multicultural Center and was formerly director of ELL (English Language Learners). She has wide experience with community partnerships and using grant funding to support these efforts.

The district continues to engage in an extensive array of partnerships providing a wide variety of programs to students and families through formal and informal agreements or MOUs. Equity for students and families is one of four top priorities in the district, and many of the partnership programs seek to increase equity and opportunity. Valenzuela described the overarching goal for seeking community partnerships to support students this way:

I've always had grants that involved community partnerships, because I believe firmly that in order to have an advantage for the students who are new to this country, they have

to be exposed to as many experiences as possible. And you can find that in those different kinds of programs. Schools can't do that by themselves.

The district's Multilingual and Multicultural Center offers programs to assist multilingual families with school registration, health and ELL screenings, citizenship classes, and offers access to interpreters and community outreach staff. These efforts employ staff and volunteers from diverse groups in the community. The Center also coordinates the Make it Happen program where immigrant students in the district's high schools can enroll in college courses supported by scholarships from Maine colleges and universities, and are paired with community members who meet with students weekly at the schools for academic mentoring and assistance with resumes.

Community organizations and individual partners provide after-school programs or other opportunities for students that support academic skills, social-emotional development, health and wellness, and cultural enrichment. At the high school level, some of these programs include: after-school programming to provide academic or homework support; SAT preparation; social-emotional support; academic coaching and mentoring; career exploration; and civic engagement. These partnership programs are funded by grants, foundations and other sources and there is generally no direct cost to the district or to families. Let's Get Ready is a community program that provides SAT preparation. Seeds of Peace is a program exploring identity, global and intercultural understanding and peace. Career awareness and readiness for students is supported through the district's Youth Development program, where local businesses provide extended learning for high school students through internships, job shadowing, practice interviews, mentoring and career fairs. Individuals also mentor high school students and meet with them in the school or virtually.

At the elementary and middle grade levels there is also a wide range of partnerships providing programs. These include after-school and enrichment programming in partnership with the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, Portland Recreation Department, and other groups. Some partnerships provide short term programs or events. Rippleffect is a program funded by the schools and a community organization supporting school fieldtrips to a local island for team and community-building activities. The Foster Grandparents program engages seniors in the community who tutor students in classrooms on a daily basis, providing mutual benefit to students and seniors. Again, nearly all of the programs provided through partnerships are without

cost to the schools or families. Reflecting on the vast number of partnerships that benefit schools in the district, a number that the district struggles to quantify, Valenzuela commented,

I can't believe the staggering amount of money, in terms of volunteer hours, that we get. . . It's a lot of goodwill you create. Part of this, too, is about goodwill making. It's about community building. It's about the community coming together.

During the period of COVID-19, students often participated in their classes remotely either by choice or by school schedule. This posed a challenge for parents, teachers and staff who needed to work and could not stay home with their children. The district used some of the federal CARES relief funding to contract with community organizations to provide safe, supervised spaces for students to participate in their classes remotely. These students then dispersed to other community organizations to participate in a variety of after-school programs.

Asked about the impacts of these community partnerships for students, Valenzuela highlighted the importance of providing cultural enrichment opportunities to students, particularly those who have higher levels of poverty and/ or have recently immigrated into the US. But she also noted that the benefits work both ways—both students and the community organizations or the community at large are enriched through these deeper interactions.

I think that it's about having kids well-rounded. It's about . . . providing them with the cultural experiences that many of the families couldn't afford or wouldn't know how to access those kinds of experiences. I think that's the thing that they provide. At the same time, our kids enrich the thinking and the experience itself of the providers. They also expand their horizons. I think that they know that having diverse students in their program enriches their program.

In addition to using community partnerships to support students' learning needs, the district also has a strong goal to increase family engagement. Valenzuela oversees the district's Parent University program which offers a variety of ways to engage parents and caregivers in adult learning related to supporting students' success. These include workshops facilitated by experts, book groups, and other events. Topics have included: child development, health, social-emotional wellness, mental health, computer and screen time for kids, navigating the college application process, racism and equity.

Partnership Deep Dive: Greater Portland Health

Portland school district partners with Greater Portland Health (GPH), a federally-qualified, non-profit health organization, that operates both city and school-based health clinics.

The clinics provide both urgent and preventative care using various health providers for medical services, dental care, mental health and psychiatric services. For primary care, students access the school clinics when GPH is their designated medical provider. The school clinics also provide multiple services, such as sports physicals, vaccinations, and sick visits for any student attending the school who is enrolled in the school-based health center. Services are provided with parental permission for students less than 18 years old; students 18 or older can access the clinic as adults. The district has had school-based health clinics for more than 20 years, and they are found in one large middle school and all three high schools. One high school clinic remains open to students through the summer, and students can access other GPH clinics during the summer months. The cost for these services is supported through private insurance for some families with the majority of the cost supported through state and federal funding such as MaineCare reimbursements, and philanthropic funding including United Way and other groups. GPH staff actively write grant proposals to help fund the clinics. Gita Rao is Clinical Director and has overseen the medical services in the school-based clinics for the past four years. She explained, “a particular mission is to provide culturally-relevant care to the whole community, regardless of ability to pay.”

The bulk of medical care services provided to students by GPH includes: assessment and treatment for minor illnesses, vaccinations, covid testing and testing for STD infections, and family planning. Dental hygienists visit all schools in the district to provide basic cleanings and assessment, while a dentist is available for other services at one high school clinic. Mental health screenings are also provided and referrals for further care. Students also have access to social workers who provide mental health counseling within the school-based health centers. Psychiatric nurse practitioners also provide mental health services within the health centers.

Rao indicated that about 50% of her time is spent treating students’ mental health needs in the high school clinics. She attributed much of this to the high risk population of students enrolled in many of the district’s schools, where students often present with multiple, complex mental and emotional issues, often stemming from the trauma students experience prior to and through their immigration. Rao explained,

We're seeing folks that have experienced like, six months of traveling with limited resources, and violence and separation from caregivers, or loss of family. So a lot of teens who have experienced trauma in their home countries, and even unaccompanied minors who have come alone, because they've lost their families and have witnessed that

violence. And that trauma leads to so many different presentations of symptoms. We are also seeing many students with depression, anxiety, and certainly PTSD.

Students' behavioral health needs are often detected first through changes in school attendance in school, behavior, sleep changes, academic performance changes, physical illness. Rao noted the importance of school-based clinics for helping to integrate information to get at the root causes of problems to support the whole child. To that end, GPH has formed teams with school staff that meet regularly to monitor the needs of higher-risk teens to support their health and academic success. Rao explained the positive impact for teens, "That type of team approach, in a natural setting such as school, where they feel safe, and where it's part of their day, is really supportive and stabilizing for some teens, where they can have this natural place they go to receive services." GPH has community health workers who serve a critical role in engaging families throughout the community in healthcare and help families understand how the school-based health centers may positively support a child's health and academic learning.

Other Mental Health Partners

In addition to the partnership with Greater Portland Health to operate school-based health clinics, Portland school district also has partnerships with many other organizations that provide mental health services and behavioral counseling, such as Spurwink and Sweetser. The district operates day treatment sites at one elementary school and one high school. Students are referred to services through the Response to Intervention (RTI) process, and behavioral support clinicians come to the school to work with individual students and small groups. The partners also help train school staff on mental health issues. Services are billed to private insurance or MaineCare for reimbursement. Chris Reiger, the district's director of Clinical Behavioral Supports, explained that the district is making an effort to have clinicians attend students' IEP meetings to inform classroom support, but has encountered a challenge in that providers cannot bill for time spent on non-direct services. He emphasized that social-emotional and mental health is a priority in the district, which employs at least one full-time social worker in each school and two in most high schools and school psychologists for assessments. The district sees a need for students who have experienced trauma to access longer-term therapy trauma beyond what school social workers can provide.

Reflections on Challenges and Needs

Reflecting on both the advantages and challenges of an urban school district for forming community partnerships to support students and families, Valenzuela saw Portland's highly diverse community as a chief asset. But she also noted a strong community spirit of cooperation and willingness to support residents and their needs. She noted, "Portland is a community that, they come together, [for example], when we had asylum-seeking families. I think that it's an asset. Our community itself is an asset."

Some of the challenges are related to the rich variety and large number of potential partnerships, and managing that in terms of time and coordination. In the past, community organizations tried to approach individual schools about partnership, which overwhelmed school staff and principals. Having a coordinator at the school level but also more central coordination to vet and initiated the partnerships has been helpful.

The broad cultural and language diversity in the district also means the district has had to provide more support to communicate with families about program opportunities for their children, and help them complete registration forms. Valenzuela has been key in helping with that outreach and support. Negotiating points of conflict and sensitivity to specific cultural needs has been another learning point. For example, some families were opposed to mixed gender, school-sponsored overnight trips and the district shifted to day fieldtrips and a focus on building trust among parents and families.

The diversity of languages in the district and large number of immigrants also means that Greater Portland Health requires interpreters to assist with roughly 85% of the student visits to the school clinics and phone calls to families. They use a phone service to provide interpreting services. The healthcare provider is also striving to diversify its staff and professional providers.

The struggle to identify funding for partnerships is also a challenge in a time of diminishing resources. This is where community organizations have been so important in working to access grant funding and other sources of funding to support programs.

When asked about the district's goals for community partnerships in the future, Valenzuela explained she would like to see partnerships become more integrated with the school program, the district's broader vision and goals, to involve community partners more deeply and deliberately to support those goals. She spoke of the "opportunity for embedding the partners in our work" and having a "deep connection with them," and "creating a more cohesive, tight relationships with partners," rather than thinking of partnerships as simply having places for

students to access after-school enrichment programs. One example she gave was the idea of bringing community partners into the schools to participate with educators in professional development on equity and other topics related to students' learning experiences.

Growing Partnerships through Pre-K Programs

The MDOE has continued to encourage and support school districts' development of partnerships with community or regional organizations to expand programs and services to children and their families, both prior to school entry and beyond. In 2016, the MDOE provided seed grants to two districts highlighted in this report (MSAD 17 and RSU 34) to encourage development of school-community partnerships. Since then, the agency has since taken broader action to build state and local capacity for these types of partnerships, starting with Pre-K programs and expanding around those.

Recognizing the need for stronger inter-agency coordination at the state level to support districts' early childhood education programs, the MDOE initiated the formation of an inter-agency state leadership team across education and health and human services in 2018. This team has broad representation from the two agencies and the Children's Cabinet.

The MDOE and state team continued to support work in 13 districts that were part of the state's Pre-K Expansion grant. Through that project, the state used additional funding from a federal grant in 2018-2020 to contract with an outside consultant to provide professional development and technical assistance to both the inter-agency team and the 13 districts. The state drew on the expertise of David Jacobson of the Educational Development Center (EDC), using his framework for community schools and research on the importance of the first ten years of a child's life as setting a strong foundation for subsequent positive academic and social student outcomes (Jacobson, 2019). The EDC framework features four components that are broadly consistent with the framework proposed by the Coalition of Community Schools described earlier in this report (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2018), in that it highlights the concepts of: 1) coordinated and comprehensive services to children and families, 2) professional collaboration to improve teaching and learning, 3) culturally responsive partnerships with families, and 3) strategic leadership and on-going assessment.

The 13 districts implementing the "First 10" framework were expected to form local teams that included broad school and community representation. District plans needed to address three areas: 1) improving teaching in learning from Pre-K to grade three, 2) engaging and

supporting families from pre-natal through grade three, and 3) enhancing comprehensive services to students and families. Local teams worked closely with Jacobson of EDC, MDOE staff and the state team during the final 18 months of the grant project to develop their plans and implement at least one action step on that plan. MDOE staff continued to support districts after the grant ended.

District plans were ambitious but encountered some challenges and limitations due to COVID-19. Most districts focused their initial action steps on strengthening their outreach and relationships with families from Pre-K through first grade. For example, districts formed new partnerships with Head Start programs, or partnered with a local library or formed school-based play and learn groups that brought families into the school to both learn about supporting early child development but also deepen their relationships with the school. Other districts established family resource centers that hold parent education events. One district provided professional development to staff on trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning (SEL) of students. Rural schools and teams in the project gravitated to the elementary school “hub” model of a community school, while Lewiston explored the district-wide model (Jacobson, 2020). Lee Anne Larsen, Early Learning Team Coordinator at the MDOE and one of the lead developers of Maine’s “First 10” initiative, feels that the hub model would work well for many rural schools and districts in Maine, and that community or regional partnerships is a promising strategy to help address the challenging needs of students and families.

If we can do a better job of coordinating partnering and collaborating, I think it would go a long way to a more supportive and seamless approach, and probably a more fiscally sound approach. . . . The notion of school as a hub is an important concept, especially in a rural state. In some of the more urban areas, there is more possibility for some other agencies to really take the lead on this kind of a design.

The goal is for districts to expand their efforts over time to connect with families and to partner with community organizations so support children from birth through grade three and beyond. Information on the state’s “First 10” initiative, including district plans, related materials and reports can be found on the MDOE website:

<https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/earlychildhood/first10>

Reflections on Challenges and Needs

While the initial federal funding has ended, the MDOE continues to actively seek further support for this initiative. The inter-agency state team continues to meet and assess what has

been learned from the initial “First 10” implementation, and to identify and assemble technical assistance to support local efforts. Larsen described some of the challenges and implications for supporting and sustaining school-community partnerships.

First, funding is needed to support time and professional learning for the individuals involved in developing and leading these partnerships. Grant funding typically provides start up funding, but sustaining partnerships requires a funding commitment by the local school district, partners, and state agencies involved in providing support and technical assistance. Larsen indicated that the MDOE is exploring various potential streams of funding as grant funding is not a long-term solution. With increased awareness and research supporting the importance of early childhood years and the well being of the family for a child’s subsequent success in school, states and school systems are providing supports and services to children and families before they enter school, which has implications for state and local education spending.

Another challenge for some districts was effective leadership and coordination of their local teams and partnership efforts. The work of day-to-day coordination, connecting families to partners and services, and managing partnerships need a dedicated staff position. Many schools in the “First 10” project assigned these coordination responsibilities to existing staff, such as Pre-K Coordinators or administrators, on top of their existing duties. This often left coordinators without sufficient time to assist families or communicate with partners. One district funded a full-time position. Larsen noted the importance of figuring out how to fund family service coordinators at the local school level and wondered, “Is there a way to leverage some state funding that would really help schools have this as an established position?” Districts that tried to share a Family Services Coordinator across several schools found that person was overstretched. Larsen said the findings indicate a school level family liaison or family services coordinator may be needed for larger schools, while smaller districts might be able to share a coordinator among two or more schools. Larsen explained,

If you do not have someone to coordinate this work at the local level it's probably going to be a very long road to trying to pull this off. . . . So you really need someone for whom this can be their full time work . . . maybe like a family services coordinator. But some kind of a position, probably someone with a background in social work who understands how to reach out and work with families, how to coordinate the various partners. . . . For the day to day operation and to implement that kind of a plan you need a point person. . . . That person can coordinate with the school or district team, but it's not all going to fall on the principal to try to take this on.

This is an area where the state leadership team is trying to help by developing tools such as a generic job description to help districts define this role.

While the local teams were successful in bringing together partners and conducting a needs assessment and forming a plan, they also needed technical assistance. This is an area where the state may be able to help districts by identifying appropriate instruments and providing guidance to support the needs assessment process and planning process. Districts may also need guidance on approaches for conducting on-going evaluation of programs delivered through partnerships. One area where districts indicated a need for additional support is aligning their academic program across Pre-K, kindergarten and first grade.

Finally, Larsen also reflected on the need to continue to provide leadership and coordination at the state level, not only through the inter-agency team for early childhood education and school partnerships, but also a dedicated state level coordinator to provide direct guidance and support to local teams or family services coordinators. She commented, “It probably is going to take a state level position to help support this.” She noted that the state could provide assistance in helping schools to connect with each other to share effective strategies, “building out a network for the folks working in this position so that they have colleagues to talk to.”

Districts participating in the “First 10” initiative provided feedback to the state team indicating they would like continued support from the state for school-community partnerships, streamlined licensure policy for schools and providers, ways to share ideas and successful work across districts and communities, for example through a network, a statewide directory to help districts locate services and partners, on-going professional development for administrators on early childhood education, and professional development to support targeted mental health services to students (Jacobson, 2020).

Discussion of Findings

In this section, we provide an overview of the findings across the six case studies of Maine school districts that have successfully developed partnerships with community and regional groups. First, we discuss the factors that motivated districts to form partnerships to address student and family needs, including community poverty, uneven access to social and health services, academic challenges and improving local community vitality. Secondly, we describe the broad range of partnerships districts engaged in to meet these needs, and then

describe efforts that specifically fell into the categories of health, mental health or social services and programs. We examine challenges districts experience in forming and sustaining partnerships as well as monitoring on-going efforts. Finally, we highlight successful partnership strategies districts engaged in, including the diversity of governance models, funding, and long-term planning and coordination.

Factors Motivating Schools or Districts to Form Partnerships

All of the districts participating in this study faced multi-faceted community challenges that they endeavored to address through partnerships with community-based organizations, businesses, and social service agencies. Students receiving free and reduced price lunch, often used as a proxy for students in the district experiencing poverty, ranged from 51-63% in the case study districts. District superintendents talked about the challenges that uneven economic opportunity for families in the community created for students arriving at school ready to learn. Food insecurity, uneven insurance coverage, as well as lack of consistent access to transportation to see off-site mental health providers all presented barriers to attendance, student engagement in classroom learning and facilitating positive child development during the school day.

- **Increasing access to mental and physical health services:** Many districts were motivated to support family and community well-being through increased access to health services, both mental and physical. Lack of transportation and/ or lack of health insurance were barriers to health access for many families in both rural and urban areas. For many districts, creating partnerships to address barriers to health care was viewed by administrators as a way to increase students' school attendance, learning time, and engagement in learning.
- **Increasing school readiness:** Across districts, these partnerships were motivated by a desire to build relationships with families early on, prior to kindergarten, and to provide supports to families during critical developmental years between birth and five years of age. Districts saw these partnerships as an important way of increasing school readiness for students and building trust with those families prior to their children enrolling in school. Moreover, access to high quality, affordable early childhood programs in many of the case study communities was low, reflecting a broader trend in Maine (Maine Public, 2019).
- **Welcoming new Mainers and increasing cultural responsiveness:** Districts such as Portland and Lewiston that serve a large number of new immigrant students were motivated to partner with community organizations and agencies in order to meet the needs of this population, make them feel welcome and accepted by the school and broader community, and to implement culturally-responsive practices and build trust with families and community leaders of these new communities. These initiatives included both partnerships that supported students in school, like Next Step in Lewiston, and provided wraparound services, such as the Multilingual and Multicultural Center in Portland. The Calais school district partnered with tribal

agencies to ensure that district practices were supportive of their Passamaquoddy students and their families.

- **Creating new opportunities for enrichment:** Districts were often motivated to partner with outside agencies and organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Clubs or the YMCA, to provide expanded access to a wide variety of enrichment activities for students, including outdoor expeditions, sports, and life skills. These partnerships also served the needs of some working parents by providing care for students between the end of school and the end of the office workday.
- **Supporting student aspirations and post-secondary planning:** Some districts were motivated to partner with youth development organizations in order to support post-secondary transitions and planning for students. District leaders recognized that there was a need to support students as they transitioned out of high school to raise their aspirations and overcome barriers to post-secondary education. Examples of these partnerships included working with the Jobs for Maine Graduates program and the partnership between RSU 34 and the Old Town Y River Runners program, supported by the Aspirations Incubator. The Portland district had career awareness and mentoring for high school students, and a program for high school students to take college courses at no cost.

Range of Programs and Services Provided through Partnerships

For the six school district cases profiled in this report, and the 13 districts involved in the MDOE's Pre-K expansion grant program, school districts showed success in developing a wide range of diverse partnerships with community organizations to meet students' academic, health, mental health, and other social needs, and to support their families' health, education and social needs as well. In addition, one district developed an alternative sentencing program for at-risk youth in that community. The range of programs and services fell into the following six categories:

- **Academic programs** to: track individual student progress; provide interventions earlier; implement or expand Pre-K programs such as partnerships with Head Start; support enrichment, after-school programs and fieldtrips; provide supervised remote learning facilities for students during COVID-19; provide early college course taking in high school; and provide individual mentoring on preparation for college and careers
- **Healthcare services** for students, families and staff: partnering with hospitals or other healthcare systems to provide low or no-cost access on school site or nearby, for urgent and routine medical care, testing for infections, referrals, vaccinations, family planning services, telehealth services via video-conference, health education for students and families; dental health services
- **Mental health services** for students, families and staff: partnering with hospitals or other healthcare systems to provide low or no-cost access on school site or nearby, screenings and assessment, referrals, telehealth services via video-conference, individual and small group counseling, substance abuse and prevention programs, and adult education

- **Juvenile justice intervention programs** for at-risk youth for alternative sentencing that includes counseling, community service and other education programming (RSU 25)
- **Other social services** for families: home visits by a family liaison or social worker; referral to other social service programs for assistance with income, housing, job training, parent education; substance abuse and prevention treatment programs; citizenship classes; translators and community outreach coordinators; life coaches for students

Partnerships Focusing on Health

Many of the districts chose to engage with health service agencies to meet student and family mental and physical health needs. In many cases, these partnerships were formed with geographically proximate agencies to provide basic health care, health assessments and screenings, counseling and other preventative services within easy access of district schools. In other cases, especially for mental health services, partnerships with agencies such as Healthy Acadia, Pathways or Spurwink allowed schools to ensure that students with mental or behavioral health needs would have access to providers in the face of transportation barriers and long wait lists. These partnerships typically involved providing office space to providers in district schools on a regular basis and close collaboration between administrators, school nurses, guidance counselors, social workers and special education faculty.

The benefits of these partnerships for districts included expanded access to services for students and their families, healthcare that was affordable or no cost to the families, reduced wait-times to see providers, reduced transportation barriers due to inconsistent access to a car or public transit issues, as well as greater potential coordination between the providers and the school. The coordination between school and agency providers allowed for staff to quickly refer students who were missing school or showing indicators of health or mental health concerns. In the case of some of the partnerships, such as the Blue Devil Health Center in Calais, the relationship with the health center supported curricular opportunities for secondary students around healthy living and personal wellness.

Challenges in Forming or Sustaining Partnerships

School district leaders noted different kinds of challenges related to forming and sustaining partnerships with other organizations. There were many themes that recurred across the district cases, while a few were more particular to the district or rural/ urban locations.

All districts agreed that identifying and initiating potential partnerships takes time, effort and strong leadership. In rural areas, some of the districts in our six cases and the MDOE's Pre-K expansion grant program and First 10 initiative indicated they had more difficulty identifying

potential partners, either due to the smaller number of organizations in those less populated areas or due to a lack of personal contacts. Given what we know about higher turnover of district and school leadership in smaller, rural districts, the short tenure of these leaders may reduce opportunities to develop relationships across the community and region that could lead to partnerships.

Forming productive partnerships involved time and effort as well, and often began with exploring common interests, goals and perceptions of community needs. The Pre-K expansion districts and others often needed assistance with the needs assessment process and program evaluation efforts. While we found little direct evidence of program evaluation for the partnership efforts, both districts and the partnering organizations recognized this activity as essential for assessing what is working and what might need to be revised to improve impact.

Managing and maintaining effective partnerships was another area identified as challenging, although our six district cases demonstrated success in this area. When different views or approaches are evident, communication and effort was needed to find consensus on how to proceed. As community needs change, programs may need to be revised or ended in favor of new efforts. Some districts noted the challenging aspects of sharing information about students to ensure coordination of student supports and progress, and they worked out systems to ensure privacy rules were observed.

Finally, one of the major challenges of partnerships is the financial aspect of supporting the cost of programs and staff. Many of the individuals we interviewed noted the impact of reduced access to state or federal funding for some these types of efforts, and the fact that most grants provide only a few years of seed funding. They worried about their ability to sustain programs that had achieved positive impacts for students and families.

Successful Strategies for Supporting Partnerships

Districts utilized a variety of strategies to support their efforts at building successful partnerships with community organizations. We describe some of the common practices and structures that were used in this section.

In most cases, it was the superintendent who took a lead role in reaching out to potential partner organizations. In larger districts, it was sometimes another district leader who took this initiative. The ability to identify potential partners often depended on having long-standing relationships within the community and knowledge of key stakeholder groups and individuals.

Superintendents sometimes sat on other executive boards and were able to use these relationships to approach potential partners. The recruitment of partners often began with an informal cold call to the CEOs of these organizations. While we applaud district leaders' initiative, vision and continuing efforts to forge new partnerships for their districts, not all district leaders may have the interest or skills to work on partnerships, or may find their other job duties do not allow time for this effort. That may be an argument for creating an administrative position dedicated to this effort.

District leaders strategically pursued partnerships that would align with and support district goals and priorities. This ensured that programs did not compete with the district's focus and high need areas. A formal needs assessment was often conducted to provide data to inform priorities for programs and services. Different organizations were able to support partnership efforts by bringing their own expertise in specific areas, technical assistance, grant writing skills, facilities, staff, evidence-based programs, and access to various funding streams.

Maintaining strong partnerships often involved the creation of new, collaborative structures, such as advisory or stakeholder teams, to ensure frequent communication among the partnering entities and to provide guidance and oversight for their joint efforts. The theme of giving multiple community stakeholders a "seat at the table" was a common one, to build a strong relationship and buy-in among partners. Some districts also added staff at the school and district level to support and coordinate partnerships and outreach to families seeking programs and services. Districts also worked to make sure programs and services provided by other organizations were consistent with district practices and values, and some districts even integrated these more fully into regular school programs or structures.

Technology played a role in delivering many of the services, particularly health and medical health assessments and services to students, and facilitating communication with families and multilingual families needing translators. However, technology could play a larger role in partnering efforts to support increased access to educational and other programs for students and families. We describe this idea more in the implications section.

By partnering with organizations that were uniquely equipped to secure state, federal and other types of funding, school districts reduced the need to draw upon local school budgets to provide students and families with expanded programs and services. This is one of the real strengths of leveraging existing resources outside the school system.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on a few Maine school districts that have been successful in forming partnerships with community organizations to improve their programs and services to students and their families, and to meet their needs beyond academic learning. The sample is small due to the intensive nature of qualitative research interviewing. A larger sample of districts might reveal other types of partnership efforts that address student and family needs in other ways, different challenges or successful strategies. Another limitation of the study is that we did not hear directly from students or families who use these programs and services, but only interviewed district leaders and representatives from the partnering organizations.

Conclusion and Implications

The school district cases profiled in this report have successfully formed partnerships with a wide variety of community organizations and individuals, supported through various sources of funding, to strengthen their ability to address the broader needs of the whole student and families. The desire to improve access to medical, dental and mental healthcare, connect families with social services, build stronger relationships with families, expand Pre-K enrollment and provide enrichment experiences to students were the primary factors that motivated districts to seek partnerships with other organizations. Most of the programs and services provided through partnership fell into the categories of academic, healthcare, mental health, or social services, and most of these targeted high-need families living in poverty and at-risk youth. In the two larger urban centers, Lewiston and Portland, programs and services also targeted the diverse immigrant communities and sought to use culturally-responsive practices to build trust and meet the needs of families wishing to participate in programs and services. Districts also worked to integrate many of their partnership programs into the school program and school day.

District leaders used similar strategies to initiate, develop and maintain successful partnerships with community organizations. These strategies included: intentionally selecting partners that could support district goals and priorities, drawing on professional connections and relationships within the community, engaging with diverse stakeholders to find common goals and concerns, forming a coalition or team structure to oversee partnerships efforts, conducting community needs assessments, tapping a variety of public and private funding sources including grants and donations, and creating administrative or staff positions at the district and school levels to manage the day-to-day work of the partnerships and outreach to families.

While our district cases demonstrated high levels of success with partnerships, these districts and others participating in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion grant program and First 10 initiative experienced challenges in their efforts. Rural districts were more likely than the urban districts to report more difficulty in finding potential partners in their local or neighboring communities. These districts were also smaller with less capacity to fund positions to coordinate partnerships or work as school-family liaisons. Districts in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion program reported a need for more technical support for conducting needs assessments and eventually program evaluation. Those same districts benefited from professional development on community-school models and guidance from the state in developing partnerships, and they indicated a need for on-going and expanded professional development on both early child education and trauma-informed practices in their schools. These districts also benefited from the effort to increase inter-agency coordination and communication between education and health and human services to support Maine districts in their expansion of Pre-K programs and wrap-around services to families. The need to identify sustainable funding sources to continue the state's efforts and local efforts through partnerships was a concern for all districts and partners highlighted in this study.

The findings from this study suggest some potential implications for state and local education policy, as well as for local efforts to develop and sustain partnerships. We outline a few of these implications in this section.

Alignment of Partnerships with District Priorities

- While there are many potential partnerships and programs districts might pursue, strategically selecting a few that most closely align with and support current district goals and priorities can help districts achieve greater impact in those high need areas, without over-stretching administrative and staffing capacity.
- Districts should pursue partnerships and programs that best fit their unique community needs, based on their local demographics and available partners. A generic model for school and community partnership would not work everywhere. Rather, it is a locally crafted endeavor, requiring time and effort to fully engage with diverse stakeholder groups in the community, find common interests, and share expertise and resources for a common goal.

Guidance and Technical Support

- Districts involved in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion grant program appreciated the external technical support, with funding from a federal grant, to guide their efforts in developing and implementing a partnership plan. In essence, they had access to experts to

coach their school teams. The MDOE is continuing to build its online resources for supporting community-school models. This would be an efficient way to share needs assessment tools, guidance and resources on forming and funding partnerships, and tools for evaluating programs. The Coalition for Community Schools also provides many valuable resources on their website: www.communityschools.org

Professional Development Needs

- While the six districts featured in our case studies did not mention having access to professional learning about community-school models or partnerships, the 13 districts participating in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion grant program appreciated having this knowledge to inform their efforts to expand outreach and programs for families prior kindergarten. Thinking about the needs of the whole child means engaging with families earlier and in different ways, and creating new structures within the school and district to support that effort.
- Areas where those districts saw a need for professional development included: early child education and development for staff and administrators, trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning for students.

Funding

- While districts used state and federal grants and donations to support programs for students and families, these sources are typically seed money to start programs. Sustaining these efforts will take more reliable funding streams, most likely through a combination of state and local education funding. The state might start by adding funding to the EPS funding model for a district level community partnership coordinator and full or part-time school-family liaisons for schools. For smaller districts, schools might be able to share a family liaison staff position. For larger districts, a full-time family-liaison position may be needed. Over time, this investment is likely to pay off with improved student participation in early childhood education and Pre-K programs, improved student academic success, stronger relationships with families as their children transition into schools, and improved student and family physical and mental health, all of which can lead to improved economic impacts for the state as well.
- Regional collaboration can be encouraged by the state through seed grants and local efforts to share resources and programs across school districts. In particular, larger districts might share access to programs and academic courses for students through cooperative agreements and the use of video-conferencing and telehealth services. Partnerships with local colleges and universities can support college aspirations and course taking for high poverty or immigrant high school students. Technology can play a larger role in supporting resource sharing across districts and partners, and this may help to address the disadvantages that small, rural districts have in finding partners.

Coordination

- Improved coordination at state, regional and local levels can support districts' efforts to develop and sustain partnerships and programs that address a broad spectrum of students'

and families' needs. The inter-agency coordination and collaboration between education and health and human services at the state level is an important step in supporting districts' efforts and identifying and eliminating some of the potential challenges or barriers districts and their partners experience. One aspect districts struggled with was how to share relevant information about a student to better coordinate support and services while adhering to privacy rules. Additional funding and staff may be needed to support inter-agency coordination, as well as expanded support from the state for districts statewide.

- Districts also identified the need for coordination at the local level, through partnership collaboratives or teams as well as with staffing positions in districts and schools to help coordinate programs and services to families.

Communication

- The inter-agency coordination described at the state level should lead to improved communication between the education and health and human services agencies, and better communication with school districts.
- Rural districts experienced more challenge in identifying potential partners. Districts in the MDOE's Pre-K Expansion grant program and First 10 initiative suggested the state provide assistance in sharing a directory of organizations that could be potential partners for school districts. They also suggested the development of a statewide network of districts implementing school-community partnerships to share ideas and their own successful models with this effort.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Appendix A: Interview Protocol
MEPRI Study of School and Community Partnerships

Your community

Please tell me about your community. How would you describe it to someone who has never been here before?

What are the major changes you've noticed over the last decade or so?

Your school

What are you most proud of about your school?

What are some of the challenges currently facing your school?

Collaborations

To what extent does your school collaborate or partner with outside organizations?

What are some of the programs or services to community members that you provide through partnerships?

Focusing in on partnerships for health / mental health specifically, please describe these in more detail.

What impacts have you seen for students as a result of these partnerships? For families? For the community?

Which of these partnerships do you think has been most successful? Why?

What aspects of starting up these partnerships have been most challenging? Why?

What challenges do you face in sustaining these partnerships and programs?

Are there any partnerships you think your school needs that you haven't been able to cultivate yet? Why not?

How have you had to adapt these partnerships in the context of COVID-19-19?

Wrap-up

Is there anything else you'd like to add that would help someone to understand how you approach wraparound supports for your students?

What advice would you give other school districts about developing community partnerships?