

Spotlighting Maine's Efforts to Strengthen Education for Students, Families and Schools Across The State

Seth Gerson: Hi and thank you for tuning in today. My name is Seth Gerson. I'm Program Director for [K-12 Education](#) here at the National Governors Association and welcome to NGA's webinar: Spotlighting Maine's Efforts to Strengthen Education for Students, Families and Schools Across the State.

Today, I'm honored to engage in a conversation with Joe Marro, Senior Policy Advisor for Governor Janet Mills and Maine Commissioner of Education, Pender Makin to provide insights on how they've worked together to advance Governor Mills' education policies and priorities in Maine.

Joe has served as a Senior Policy Advisor for Governor Mills since 2020, and before that he served as Director of Advocacy for the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce, and as an Advisor to U.S. Congresswoman Chellie Pingree of Maine for more than five years. Commissioner Makin was nominated as Commissioner by Governor Mills in December 2018, and began in her current role in January 2019. Before that, the Commissioner served as an Assistant Superintendent for Brunswick School District for more than three years, as a principal for nearly 12 years, and as a classroom teacher for seven years. She also co-founded the Collaborative for Perpetual Innovation in 2015, an organization providing professional development in the areas of school safety, school climate and trauma-informed practices.

So welcome to both of you, and thanks so much for joining us. So I want to start with that partnership between the Governor's office and the Maine Department of Education between the two of you. How have you worked together to move the Governor's education agenda forward? What have been the keys to doing so effectively? So, Joe, let's start with you, and then we'll move to the Commissioner.

Joe Marro: Sure. Thanks, Seth, and thanks so much for having both of us here today. It's great to be here with you. You know, it's funny, Pender and I had to kind of laugh at this question, because it's more of a question of when aren't we working together? When aren't we collaborating? It's easier to answer, I think, than when are we. We talk on a basically a daily basis. We really work hand in glove in terms of the things that are coming out of the legislature, things that are popping up in schools, whether that's from representatives of the Maine School Management Association or the Maine Education Association or the curriculum leaders or others.

And it's a daily sort of grind of making sure we're up on the latest issues that are that are being faced by Maine schools. And then sort of collaborating on how we want to ensure that the state is helping in a streamlined way that isn't duplicating efforts and they aren't getting multiple answers from the Governor's office and the Department of Education. We want to make sure it's streamlined for schools. Things are hard enough for them with information from different streams all the time. So, we're trying to make sure that we are speaking with one voice. Pender, you want to add there?

Commissioner Pender Makin: Yeah, thanks, Joe. No. I agree 100%. And let's say clear communication. The two of us together, I mean, we are lock step. I consider you to be the great translator and smoother over person. You keep your finger on the pulse of what's going on with the legislators, and what's in their

heads. What are their individual and collective goals and priorities. And then we discuss those, and I've got my finger on the pulse of what's happening in the schools across our state. And I think together we work really well with all the constituent groups. We have a bi-weekly meeting with what we call the Ed Orgs, and those are the leaders of the organizations who represent the facets of education. So that would be including the Maine Education Association, so that the state teacher's union leadership and the Maine Principal's Association, the principal's association, and then the Maine School Superintendents Association, which would be the superintendents and school boards, school board members, and they each have their own association and leadership, also the curriculum directors, the business managers, and CTE.

So, we pull that team together, and we have done it since the very beginning of our administration to make sure that we have absolutely clear and aligned, which it's very hard when you think about some of those groups in other states will find that they are typically, perhaps misaligned or have competing interests. And we worked so hard, thank goodness, during 2019 to get those groups to work together. So we problem solved a few very difficult bills with some high feelings on both sides, and we successfully processed our way through that and having done that when COVID hit, we then had a team and we were able to not experience some of the very negative, divisive discourse and disagreements that were happening in other states where those different groups went to their separate corners and battled things out. We worked as 100% a team. I would attribute a lot of our alignment throughout all of that to Joe's presence as well in those meetings.

Seth Gerson: It's so great to hear. It sounds like a real collective effort and this idea of meeting together with key constituencies, so that you're on the same page, the clear communication that can happen not only off meeting, but then also being able to hear the same sentiments from those groups and be able to then talk to one another based on the same information sounds really critical.

Joe, I wanted to just look at one particular piece that I know that there's been some collaboration on - the [Maine's Children's Cabinet](#) that Governor Mills reinstated in 2019. Can you talk a little bit about what the catalyst was for reinstating that Children's Cabinet, and how you've seen success for from cross-agency collaboration.

Joe Marro: Yeah, I think the Governor coming in 2019 looked at some of a need for cross-agency collaboration. Some of the different agencies working on very similar efforts. But the need to streamline some of those and to bring them all under one roof so everybody was working off the same sheet of music. So, I think we took five different agencies to look to coordinate policies and programs focused on children and youth. And now we have a regular group of staff that meet twice a month. They've established a number of different working groups to ensure that we're collaborating and coordinating on key issues that we're all working together on.

There's kind of two goals in the Cabinet: to ensure all children enter kindergarten prepared to succeed, and then to ensure that all youth enter adulthood healthy and connected to the workforce and/or education to further their education. So it's a team. Like, I said, five different agencies. And recently, I think they're proud of a program called [Career Exploration](#), looking at grants and increasing capacity at

schools and community based organizations, helps for students to understand their career opportunities a little better, build foundational skills, employers through work based learning. We're really proud of the work that's been done there. During the first year of that program, which was school year 2022-2023, the program served about 3,500 students and around 3,000 of those, so the vast majority, ended up participating in a paid work experience. So great work done there by a group of folks that are all connected to the Children's Cabinet. So we're seeing the benefits, certainly, during this administration.

Seth Gerson: And then, because of five different agencies when you were getting started on sort of bringing those together, maybe for the first time in a long time, any sort of lessons learned for some of the offices that might be on the line, as they're sort of forming that kind of Children's Cabinet, whether Joe or Commissioner, as that was kind of coming together.

Joe Marro: I would say, maybe I don't know, Pender, I don't know if you have thoughts on that, just because I wasn't there at the very beginning, so maybe you had thoughts better than I would.

Commissioner Pender Makin: Well, I would say, because we were all a new administration when we started, I think that was key, because people hadn't had time to get very possessive of their lanes, as it were. And so I would say, that one of the best things that Governor Mills did was to immediately institute the Children's Cabinet, and so we started off our work as a Cabinet team, coordinating and cooperating and setting those really aligned goals for kids and for young adults who are parents of the youngest and most fragile kids. And you're able to really generate a kind of a two generational approach that's much more comprehensive than just the discrete little initiatives that might otherwise have been born within our separate departments.

Joe Marro: And Seth, that CTE Career Exploration program I was mentioning, that was Maine's Department of Education, Department of Economic & Community Development, Department of Labor, so our labor, our economic development folks, our office of policy innovation in the future. So all of those agencies that would have been working on a piece of that, maybe siloed, we're able to kind of come together on that work.

Seth Gerson: Well, thank you both. And yeah, true children and youth Cabinet, because it sounds like you're really focused on the kindergarten side and then also the Career Exploration CTE, so great to hear about the cross-agency collaboration there.

Commissioner, I want to just shift a little bit to some of the work I know you've been leading on as well as the Governor, and that is the [BARR Initiative](#). And I know you've been as part of NGA's project as well - [Academic Supports and Student Well-Being Project](#). The BARR (Building Assets, Reducing Risks) Initiative, can you talk a little bit about the overview of how Maine has embedded BARR into a number of schools and the impact that you're seeing from that Initiative?

Commissioner Pender Makin: Oh, I'd be so happy to and this also was born in many ways within that Children's Cabinet context. Early on we talked a lot about ACES, all of us do, the adverse childhood experiences and trauma that create risk factors in young people and inhibit their success academically,

behaviorally, socially and health wise and we had as a whole Cabinet moved toward let's look at because there is new, there's emerging wonderful research to show that positive childhood experiences actually cause mitigating protective factors that can actually undo what used to seem like a life sentence. Well, you have so many ACES, you're going to really be in trouble. And so the assets based work got us looking into the BARR model which is in of itself built on developing developmental thriving indicators or assets within students at developmentally appropriate stages throughout their lives: elementary school age, middle school and the driving indicators for adolescents. It directly teaches and builds and strengthens those assets within students and creates systems within schools that maximize whatever a school might already be doing, that's working well and that can bring into focus those things that are initiatives or efforts that schools have been working on with mixed results.

It gets all of the adults within a school talking to one another about the kids, not just about the curriculum, but also about how is everybody doing? And we were so encouraged once we looked further into the model to see the decades now of empirical studies and research that almost seemed too good to be true, to be honest, it was almost a panacea. The schools that engaged in the BARR approach see academic outcomes, they see behavioral outcomes, attendance and engagement outcomes. And they even have more recent data. Oh, they're also a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) model, a substance use prevention program, and one of their more recent and interesting studies is on the impact of the BARR program on educator job satisfaction, the sense of efficacy in their work and their likelihood to be persisting in their positions for five years or further out into the future.

We put the word out to invest. We wanted to invest some of our Federal Education Emergency Relief funding because this targeted, these outcomes really fell within the whole student approach that we have been fostering since the pandemic and we put out the call, and it's a full restructuring. Let's just be clear, to say yes to BARR is we're going to restructure the way we do the things in our school. We're going to change our schedules, perhaps change the team structures. And we're going to collect new data, or we're going to assimilate data we already have been collecting in a different way.

And so it's a heavy lift. We offered this to the Maine schools last May and we thought we would get four responses. We had 71 schools say, "Yes, please. We want to join the [Maine] Department of Education's Initiative!" And since that time we've had amazing results. And it seems to be spreading educator to educator and school leader to school leader because we are now up to, I believe we are going to have 118 BARR schools going into next fall. We just put out a second round and had additional schools sign on saying, "Yes, we want to do this." We're hearing from our colleagues some of the results that we had collected in January. So year one and BARR is a three year transitional program. After the third year there's no more cost, there's no more required coaching so it's essentially you get set up and you run as a BARR school. So in that sense it's a wonderful investment for one time funding, because once you turn that corner, you're good to go. It's gotten even better since we just learned. But I don't have the data. Since January, we have students in elementary schools having overall double digit increases in their math and reading proficiency scores. We have elementary, middle and high school also double digit reduction in chronic absenteeism, as it's defined in our state, and we also have seen our schools are reporting anywhere between a 25% and a 60% drop in discipline referrals. These are just high level survey data that we've collected as of January. So we're looking at just a handful of months and they

were already on that trajectory. And just recently we convened with 10 or more BARR schools at a [BARR National Conference](#), and these anecdotes that I don't have the hard data for now are, it just continued to get better. And we can also say that 100% of the schools that started in September of this year are reporting more positive results than they had anticipated and they all have different goals and so forth, but it's been wonderful.

Seth Gerson: Thanks, Commissioner, sounds great. Not only the pickup from so many schools, in such a short, relatively short amount of time, 118 schools, but that you're already seeing some of these year one impacts not only academically but chronic absenteeism that we know is such a big issue across the country bipartisanly, and then the reduction in discipline referrals as well.

Joe, I want to stay with student well-being, or, as the Commissioner said, a whole student approach. Can you share some of the Governor's top priorities in this area? We noticed the [School Meals For All](#) legislation that Governor Mills championed but also any other initiatives that you have in this area.

Joe Marro: Yeah, sure and just real quick on BARR, the Governor is really proud of the work that Commissioner Makin and the Department have done on BARR schools, and I remember we have a weekly Cabinet call with the entire Cabinet and the Governor usually joins those, and I remember when she first heard about BARR on one of those calls, and was very excited about it, and wanted to hear more and wanted to learn more about the work that was going to be done. And so, I know she's proud of the work that's being done there. So big, big, thanks to Commissioner Makin.

You mentioned school meals, certainly. Three years ago the Maine Legislature passed, and Governor Mills signed the bill to make school meals free to all public school students and public school students in town academies and so that's been some that's been around now for a few years. Proud of that legislation. It was bipartisan support for that legislation which Governor Mills worked to ensure. And we've seen a lot of we've heard a lot of good feedback from schools on what kind of impact that's having on students and on schools.

Staying with the student and staff well-being topic, another piece that I know Pender's Department of Education and our Department of Health and Human Services work together on is expanding school-based health centers. There initially were some Federal COVID relief funds to expand a number of school-based health centers. And then we've worked to secure additional funds for that. And out of that work, we developed school-based services working group to ensure that and we're sharing information about those initiatives, and where community services are being provided in schools. Out of that work, an even smaller working group kind of was formed, and that includes staff from DOE and DHHS working on aligning behavioral health screenings for youth in schools, to avoid duplication and confusion at the local level and ensuring that those services are best serving our students. So, it all kind of falls under that umbrella of student well-being. But it starts I think, with the Governor's and the Commissioner's commitment to, like Pender said, that whole child approach and looking out at how services and schools can be more than just academic. So really proud of the work that's been done over the last few years.

Commissioner Pender Makin: And we do have a few other initiatives related to the Governor's commitment to well-being overall of students and staff, and I guess you can't overstate the meals for all, it's different from in most other states where they have decided to create, a universal-ish meals program. This is literally everyone eats breakfast, everyone eats lunch, and the stigma is gone. So, we no longer have the problem of hunting hungry kids in our state, and we're proud to say that we just discovered in a recent survey Maine school lunches in and of themselves are among the healthiest served in the U.S. so we're very proud of our meal program.

But also, of course, there's the BARR, and there are professional learning opportunities that we're creating for teachers a train the trainer model in a process called the regulated classroom is something that we put out there. It basically leverages the brain science related to the parasympathetic nervous system, teaches teachers how to access their own parasympathetic nervous system and to be very highly regulated adults at the helm of a classroom, especially when they are confronted with, as I think people are seeing around the nation a new level of behavioral challenges that kids are bringing in the door. So it helps the adults themselves to stay regulated. And then there are strategies and lessons to help the children to also access those self-calming, self-regulating behaviors and strategies. And that's been incredibly popular. We put the offer out there a few times so far, every time it sells out statewide. And by sells out we've been providing it for free. But we end up at our absolute limit. And so that's been incredibly well received.

Also the work the Governor inspired on Pre-K expansion and supporting early childhood education. And that of course spans all of our Children's Cabinet work. And we're also paying special attention to inclusion. It's a place we struggle as a state, and we have some goals there around ensuring that children who have disabilities are included within their regular classroom settings to be learning alongside their typically developing peers. And finally, I would just throw in there the Career Exploration and those projects that the Governor also has inspired in terms of making sure that every student leaves are school system ready for the world of higher education, or a meaningful career or workplace adventure coming right after that. So, we've done a lot in terms of the Governor's goals for our children and their well-being.

Seth Gerson: Well, thank you both, and lots of initiatives, and for our viewers we'll certainly in the resources that I'll be attached to this webinar will include information around the Children's Cabinet. We'll include around the school meals, the BARR, school-based health, as Joe mentioned. And some of these other initiatives that are all leading towards addressing well-being overall.

Commissioner you mentioned a little around staff wellbeing and some of the self-regulation modeling the professional development that's being done there. We know that like so many Governors and states that Governor Mills and yourself have made educator recruitment or retention a real top priority. Also, it's a challenge in Maine as well. Can you talk to us about the state's efforts in this area, including the Teach Maine initiative?

Commissioner Pender Makin: I would be happy to, yes. So, the [#TeachMaine Initiative](#) is really a framework of a set of priorities that we are supporting throughout the field. The four key strategies are around recruitment and retention around diversifying the education workforce, around professional growth

and leadership opportunities and elevating and celebrating the education profession as well. And within the recruitment and retention work we have partnered with an agency called Live and Work in Maine and they're an economic community development company, and they have helped us with nationwide recruitment strategies for enticing people to consider a career in the beautiful state of Maine. So if you were getting off a subway in New York City, for example, you might confront a large picture of the mountains and the beautiful coastline of our state that says, "Come teach here!" and there is a way to immediately interact with a statewide job board that we put up.

So all schools still I'm sure they do their own local recruitment and hiring advertisement, but we've also made available a free statewide job board in the state of Maine so that anybody who's interested in a potential career in our state, in education, can go to a one-stop shopping kind of place where they are able to do that. And we've seen a huge uptick in out-of-state applicants as a result of some of that work.

We also aggressively highlight the great work that's happening in schools across the state, and we're trying to change the conversation. Frankly, Seth, we really are trying to make sure that people are aware that the schools are much more than what is portrayed in some of the limited portraits you might typically see in terms of "Oh, this test score or that test score." We're really trying to make sure that our public, in our state of Maine, at least, are aware of the heroic efforts and successes that are happening in classrooms, really cool stuff.

We've also very much dedicated ourselves to recognizing and augmenting the professionalism of Maine's educators. One of the efforts, we wrote a competitive grant for a federal program in the first summer, the very first months of COVID. It was for an innovation grant and we were awarded \$16 million that we used to train educators and school leaders in using design thinking, and the principles of really social engineering for increasing results in schools. And then the funds were also used to provide grants to educators and school leaders who wanted to create an innovative way to support students.

And now there is a thriving cohort across the state, the project is called [RREV \(Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures\)](#). We have a huge cohort of people who have been trained in design thinking, and who have created pilot projects, and who now share those projects and their successes with others who adopt them and make those work for their settings. So, I think when I talk about that cohort, it reminds me it's another deliberate strategy. We have worked very hard, one of the things that really strengthens a workforce, especially in something that can be so isolating as education is, we have created groups of educators who work together and in areas of common interest. So we have our Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI), a technology and digital learning cohort. We have the RREV groups, and those are people who I mean now that across the state there are these amazing outdoor education programs and classrooms that are held outdoors now, not because of COVID, but because it's amazing and engaging for kids to be out in nature while they're learning and we give them a forum. We give them a place to come together. And we're working with a community based group called Educate Maine. It's a group of business leaders who are deeply invested in education in our state, hence their name and we're working with them to develop something called the [Teach Maine Center](#) and that center is going to be a bricks and mortar place in our state, we don't know yet where, but it will mostly be a community of

educators from across the state who can pursue their interests, their professional development, leadership opportunities, and growth opportunities.

So those are a few of the things. Also, in terms of recruitment and building our workforce we have created a number of paid internship programs and teacher residencies and educator apprenticeships. And we also are looking at pathways, and we have not yet successfully, because we're not in charge of the certification rules, but we have proposed a couple of times some changes to those rules that would make it much more palatable and reasonable for people who are mid-career or for people who are new to our state, or who are new to our nation, for that matter, to come in and through a competency-based alternative pathway that I dream of, but have not successfully created, but we're hopeful that we will at some point have something like that will help us to diversify the workforce, which is extremely important for us. Throughout these efforts the good news is in this past calendar year we have issued more first-time certifications for educators than were issued in the year prior to COVID. So I'm hopeful. It doesn't mean we don't have a teacher shortage, and that we're not in the same crisis as everyone else, but I feel like we are all hands on deck to address that.

Seth Gerson: Well, thank you, Commissioner, and I think that's really what stood out to us about Teach Maine and that the focus is not only on recruitment, but retention and the specificity around the strategies along the continuum of how you're helping to support educators from across the state. And I really like what you said around the leadership opportunities again, not only specifying strategies that can be helpful for growing more teacher leaders, but actually having the programs, that from the state level, even that are providing those opportunities for teacher leadership in many different forms.

Joe, I don't know if you wanted to add onto some of the educator workforce work that the Commissioner spoke about, or I know that there's been a lot of priority on education just this past legislative session over the past years, if you want to talk a little bit about some of the more recent efforts of the Governor.

Joe Marro: Sure. Yeah, thanks, Seth. The Governor is the first Governor to meet the 55% state share of public education going all the way back to a 2004 referendum in Maine and it took about 15 years to get there. But the Governor is proud to say that we have met the 55% state share of public education and continued to provide 55% state share and intend to do so and are excited to be able to meet that.

You mentioned the recent legislative session that just finished up just a couple of weeks ago, the Governor signed a supplemental budget, and that included an increase to the minimum wage for education tech and support staff. That also was an effort from multiple groups around the state and the Governor was proud to bring folks together to work through that issue. At the beginning of the administration, the Governor signed legislation increasing the minimum teacher salary up to \$40,000 a year, which as the Governor has said, is still too low, but certainly we're proud to take that step back in 2019, and in this past legislative session there was a bill to re-raise the teacher minimum salary up to \$50,000, which didn't get through, but I do know that will be part of a conversation that's ongoing and a larger study that was legislation the Governor signed to take a broader look at how we fund public education in the state of Maine and looking at ensuring we can sustainably fund 55% of public education going forward. That includes the workforce and all of the other costs that are incorporated into that.

I've mentioned CTE a few times, but I'll just say the governor is also proud of the increased funding provided to CTE centers around the state over the course of the administration to help students gain access to the trades and different types of careers that they may want to pursue, or may want to study at one of our community colleges around the state. Pender mentioned Pre-K, certainly a priority for the Governor in investing in public Pre-K and working with districts around the state to try and ensure they can provide that in a way that that works for them and works with the community. So I'll stop there, I suppose, but a lot of good work and a lot more work that still needs to be done on some of those issues.

Commissioner Pender Makin: And free community college.

Joe Marro: Yes, I know I was keeping it K-12, but certainly if you're talking higher education, free community college. The Governor was able to instill free community college for students two years ago. And really proud of that. And we see we've seen great results. We've seen a significant uptick in enrollment at the community colleges and enrollment from first generation college students as well. So really proud of that program. Thank you, Pender.

Seth Gerson: Well, sounds like really funding increases across the board in terms of education overall, teachers and then across the continuum from Pre-K to community college, post-secondary and CTE, so thanks for sharing that, Joe. We want to make sure that we talk a little bit about, and Commissioner, you had mentioned this a little earlier in the webinar, but we know the impact that the pandemic had on the entire education system, including in Maine. You both were in your positions, at least for part of it, Joe and the Commissioner from pre to during and now post pandemic. What do you see as the lessons learned from the pandemic? And where do you see the continuing challenges and needs for support, both academically and holistically, for students and schools?

Commissioner, we'll start with you and then go to Joe.

Commissioner Pender Makin: So lessons learned, I guess I can talk about lessons that were learned in a way that was positive and then some lessons learned where we learned the hard way on a couple of things. But starting with a positive, that group of education leaders statewide, that we had immediately this inception of our and our administration. We had convened them and we worked extremely hard to build trust from the field to the Department of Education, and that hadn't been in place for close to a decade prior. Without the trust of the field, without a team of leaders statewide going into the unforeseen pandemic, we would have been in a very different place. There is absolutely no question in my mind that building those relationships and building that statewide trust network, the communication was lock step, those pieces, we were just very fortunate to have been hyper focused right from the get-go, because we knew we wouldn't have a good impact at all. We wouldn't have any impact on the field if they didn't have trust, we would just be an irrelevant bureaucratic agency that they avoided largely, and instead, we were the go-to, people came to the Department for assistance, for support, for guidance.

Another lesson learned I would say, the existence of the Children's Cabinet, and other efforts by the Governor to bring our Cabinet members together, we were able to be already working with our Health and

Human Services team in a variety of other ways, so it was a very natural partnership when it was most needed, and I think we were able to avoid a lot of pitfalls that we saw happening elsewhere because of that. So those are lessons we learned that were very positive.

Lessons that we learned the hard way in the pandemic, is just how vulnerable so many of our most disadvantaged students and families in a time of crisis like this, how vulnerable they truly were. And I'm very proud of the immediate action on the part of our team to address those vulnerabilities, but those were very hard lessons. Also our State's connectivity certainly wasn't what it ought to have been when people needed to immediately interact with the world through a Zoom.

Some other lessons I think we learned is that a lesson learned by society – of how important schools are to the community. They're the centrifugal force that keeps a society together, our local public schools. And when they were not in operation, we saw such a divide and such a tale of different Maines, I guess, during that time, and I think people began to see how important our educators and our schools were to society and I think that was an outcome, a lesson of some sort. And then I think the opportunities that we had to go for a competitive grant, so that we can cause innovation to happen because we needed to completely rethink. We didn't want to have schools shut down and then reopen, as basically the same as they were. And I'm very proud to say that I can visit schools all across the state today and see the lasting impact of those innovations that are no longer necessary because of a pandemic, but yet are creating positive experiences for kids across the board. Also attending to the whole student, was an outcome from all of this work, we realized that students who are hungry or who are dysregulated, who don't feel a sense of belonging or connection to their school setting, those student are not going to learn, they're not going to perform as well. They're not going to engage. And so we've been able to rework our overall strategic plan in terms of what we hope to see statewide to better serve students into the future. Those would be some of the lessons I think we learned.

Joe Marro: Yeah, I don't have a ton to add on that sort of, generally speaking, just, I think Pender said that really well, put that really eloquently. And it's just it's bringing me back a little bit probably is for you to Pender of some of those really early morning, or really late night calls of trying to respond to whatever was happening in late 2020, early 2021 and just trying to lean on that foundation of coordination and cooperation that we built, not only our office and Pender's team, but, as Pender was saying, the team of educators and administrators out in the field, who leaned on us for the latest information and where to go and how to respond to some of those emerging issues.

A couple of specific things I guess I would mention, too, is Pender alluded to one of them, when we realized that some of the connectivity in our state, internet access and that sort of thing was not up to par, the Governor did devote some federal CARES Act money, some Federal Relief money to the Connect Kids Now project that feels like forever ago now, but that was fall 2020, to get kids connected and be able to access school via online from home. And I think another program that I don't know if it's a lesson, but it's something that we kind of have carried on post-COVID, if you want to call it that, and that's the learning facilitators program that has been a great success. It's a program that ensures at the time back in the middle of COVID that there were folks in the classroom helping the students there in person when the teacher was teaching online, was teaching from a different location and that program has now evolved

into a program at one of our community colleges that allows for folks to more easily gain access to certification and get more quickly working in classrooms, which also helps with some of the shortages that are a nationwide problem, but certainly, an issue we're working on here in Maine.

So just a couple of sort of more specific things that came out of COVID for us where we saw a need and thanks to the Commissioner and her team and the cooperation of educators and administrators around the state, we were able to put some of those in place.

Seth Gerson: Thank you both. And I really like how you spoke about the sort of human infrastructure that was built, not only at the State Agency level by having that Children's Cabinet in place, but then your trust with the field of being able to, when the pandemic did hit, already having built the that trust and relationships. And then some of the outgrowth policy wise of this renewed focus on a whole student, the connectivity gaps and using funds to make sure to address that. And then this learning facilitators program that has continued to bear fruit even past the pandemic.

Well, we always like to end on an optimistic, a positive note, and sort of look ahead. So for both of you, what are you most excited about in the work that's upcoming? What should we be watching out for in the in the months and years ahead?

Commissioner, do you want to go first, and then Joe.

Commissioner Pender Makin: Sure. Well, I am really excited about the proliferation of the BARR schools. I am excited about we've launched a statewide Measure What Matters campaign. So we're trying to stop the very narrow measures that are typically used nationally and, in our state, to decide what what's great about a school. And so we are working statewide with focus groups and business communities and what is it that people value most in their education and system and in our local school. So I'm very excited about that work.

And the Teach Maine center is coming into its own, and that's going to be a place where we can hand over these hard gathered cohorts of like-minded educators who are out there doing the great work, and they're going to be safely positioned, there'll be administration proof in a sense they'll be, they'll be strong among one another into the future. So I think we have many reasons to be hopeful.

Joe Marro: I would echo all of those certainly. In terms of things I'm looking forward to, I'll give you a couple of short term and then maybe one more extended term. I just was communicating with the person at one of our high schools, who Pender you know, the ELOs, extended learning opportunities, that we're very proud of and Pender's team has worked very hard on to expand those opportunities that are similar to sort of an internship or an apprenticeship or a paid work experience, but within schools and it's been a really big success. And I actually heard from one of the ELO directors about coming to talk to a couple of high school students who are doing their ELO in sort of government work and public service. And so I'm excited to go and talk to those students. I think it's a kind of a nice intersection there, they want to hear from me about my work, but I'm actually more excited about the fact that they're doing those ELOs, and that they're getting that experience. So that's really cool.

And also, we haven't mentioned it I don't think on this call yet, but the [Maine Outdoor Learning Initiative](#) that the Governor used federal COVID Relief funds to get that started. It's an outdoor learning initiative that brings students in Maine either from sort of the more rural areas in inland areas to the coast or the more urban areas of the state, or vice versa, bringing some of those kids from the coast up to the woods in the mountains of Maine, with the goal of getting those students outside during the summer months and getting some learning experience that is outside of the traditional classroom. And we have some really great programs that are going to be happening this summer, and so I haven't told Pender this yet, but I think I really want to try to be able to visit one of those, I didn't get there last summer, and I think that would be really nice to be able to go and visit and see some of the work that's being done there. So also, looking forward to that.

Commissioner Pender Makin: I was able to visit. It's amazing. I recommend it.

Joe Marro: Exactly. Yes, so I'm excited about that. And then longer term, we have a study on how we can sustainably fund public education going forward in the state. I know that the Department and our office will be heavily involved in that and ensuring that I talked about 55% state share and ensuring that the state is paying its share of public education in Maine, and making sure that it is sustainable not only through the rest of our administration, but far past the t administration is our hope to leave Maine on a good footing well into the future for funding public education. So I'd say that as well.

Seth Gerson: Sounds like lots of great work happening now, and lots to look forward to in the future. And I love the thoughts of both of you left around the students as well that you're going to see because you're both leaders in the state and so growing that next generation of leaders is so critical, so just great to keep passing on that leadership.

So thank you both for a great conversation and sharing your insights, sharing your expertise with our viewers today. Again, viewers please note all of the resources that we discussed will be attached to the recording once it's released on the NGA website. So thank you again, Joe and Commissioner, and until next time, thanks for tuning in, and hope you have a great day.