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**March 27, 2025**

**Testimony of Karen Morin  
Neither for nor against LD 967**

**LD 967 An Act to Reinvigorate Maine's Workforce and Ensure Student Job Readiness by Providing Funds for the Career Exploration Program**

Senator Curry, Representative Gere and members of the Committee on Housing and Economic Development, my name is Karen Morin, and I am the Maine Career Exploration Program Manager. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am here to present testimony, neither for nor against, LD 967, An Act to Reinvigorate Maine's Workforce and Ensure Student Job Readiness by Providing Funds for the Career Exploration Program.

DECD has a long history of supporting, encouraging, and growing businesses in Maine. However, many Maine businesses are struggling to find and retain employees. At the same time, our youth need to see that there are meaningful career opportunities here—so they can envision building their futures and staying in Maine. The MCE program bridges this gap by connecting motivated youth with businesses that need a helping hand.

When business owners are focused on running their operations, they often lack the time and resources to build these essential connections on their own. MCE has filled that void by providing structured, paid career exploration opportunities that benefit both youth and employers.

You have in front of you the executive summary of the program for you to investigate the facts of the program's success so far. While I won't read it to you, I would like to highlight the critical impact this initiative has had—and will continue to have—on the communities, businesses, and youth across the State of Maine.

Launched in 2022 through the Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan, the MCE program was a \$25 million pilot initiative aimed at connecting 6,000 youth aged 16-24 with meaningful, paid career exploration opportunities across the state. The program exceeded



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expectations, providing over 6,000 work experiences and expanding career programming in schools and communities statewide.

The impact has been significant. Young people gained hands-on learning, developed job-readiness skills, and built confidence in their futures. Employers benefited by strengthening their workforce pipeline, forming connections with schools, and engaging with the next generation of Maine's workforce. Rural communities, in particular, saw new opportunities open up, helping to bridge employment gaps.

However, for this program to thrive long-term, we must ensure proper oversight and coordination. A dedicated program manager is essential to maintaining employer connections, aligning opportunities with industry needs, and sustaining this vital workforce pipeline. Without this role, we risk losing the progress we've made and missing the chance to shape Maine's future workforce.

This program is another tool that trains the future workforce of Maine. While this program is a good and worthy investment, we recognize that fiscal restraint is the greater priority at this time.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions. I will also be available for the work session.

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Maine Career Exploration (MCE) Program was a \$25 million, two-year pilot initiative launched in 2022 by Governor Janet Mills as part of her Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan. The initiative intended to connect young people to Maine's economy through age-appropriate career experiences that aligned with their interests.

**The primary goals of this initiative were to:**

- ▶ Connect 6,000 young people aged 16-24 in Maine to future career opportunities by funding paid work experiences with employers across the state.
- ▶ Expand existing and build new Career Exploration programming in high schools and communities.
- ▶ Establish infrastructure to support this programming beyond the initial federal funding for the initiative.

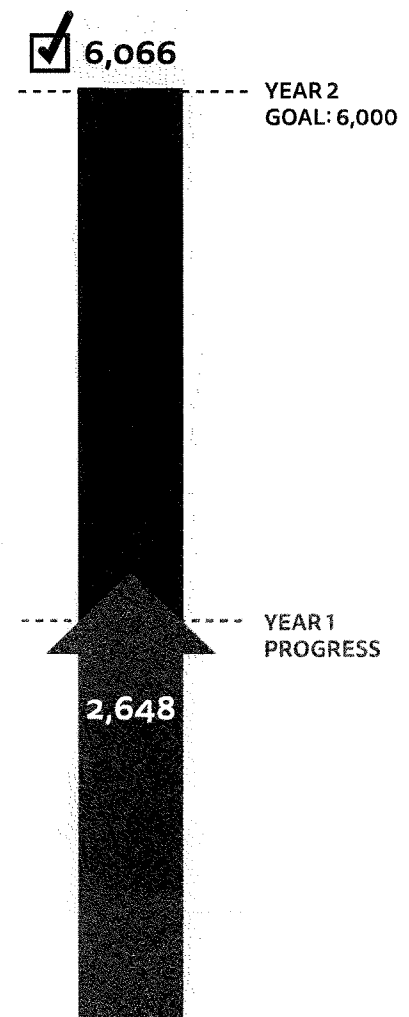
The program was managed by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), which provided administrative, statewide oversight of the initiative. **Investment into the program was allocated across three funding streams:**

1. Maine Children's Cabinet Career Exploration Pilot Project
2. Maine Department of Education Extended Learning Opportunity Expansion Program
3. Jobs for Maine Graduates Career Exploration Expansion

While each of these program areas were distinct, all aligned with emerging research, policies, and practices aimed at preparing youth for life after high school by expanding their career, life, and college readiness skills. Further, the MCE pilot program provided meaningful work experiences, career awareness and job readiness activities – opportunities that national literature identifies as critical for young people's personal and professional development.

FIGURE 1.

**MCE exceeded its goal to provide meaningful work experiences to 6,000 young people**



## Highlights by the Numbers

Across the two years of implementation, MCE programming was successful in meeting many of its goals, and exceeded its goal to provide paid, meaningful work experiences to 6,000 young people (see Figure 1.). Highlights from each program include:

- ▶ **Children's Cabinet Community-Based Organization (CBO)**
  - ▶ The Children's Cabinet pilot project supported five sites to engage 542 disconnected and underrepresented youth in career exploration and meaningful paid work programming.
  - ▶ Overall, 447 youth completed job-readiness programming, and 298 youth completed a paid work experience.
- ▶ **Maine DOE Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Expansion**
  - ▶ The Maine DOE project expanded ELO programs to 26 sites across Maine, providing 1,833 total paid work experiences.
  - ▶ Of these, 1,350 paid work experiences provided school credit. Overall, students earned 2,098.5 credits through ELO participation.
- ▶ **Jobs for Maine Graduates**
  - ▶ JMG supported ELO expansion, and 3,935 Maine students received Maine Career Exploration Badges for completing the program, an average of 558 ELO portal participants and 1,659 JMG portal participants per quarter.
  - ▶ Further, JMG provided 132 trainings and 2,707 coaching interactions to ELO coordinators and school administrators statewide.



## Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to document the impact and effectiveness of the MCE program. The Data Innovation Project (DIP) at the University of Southern Maine's Catherine Cutler Institute published an Interim Evaluation Report in March of 2024, which evaluated the preliminary participant outcomes and program implementation successes and challenges. This final report presents data across the two-year program period and expands on the findings, implications, and recommendations.

The program evaluation relied on a mixed methods evaluation design to gather formative and summative data about the MCE program from program-engaged youth, employers, and coordinators. In addition to aggregating routine program reporting, the evaluation activities and evaluation-engaged participants included:

- ▶ **Program Completion Survey:** 322 youth who participated in an ELO (229 youth) or CBO (86 youth) program completed an online survey at the end of their program experience.
- ▶ **Photovoice:** 16 youth participated in photovoice interviews, a participatory data methodology using photography and storytelling, to create profiles of their work experiences.
- ▶ **Employer Survey:** 119 employers from 48 different Maine towns and cities completed an online survey.
- ▶ **Program Coordinator Focus Groups:** 20 ELO coordinators and 6 CBO staff attended at least one of two focus groups across 2023 and 2024.

While JMG programming and its important role was discussed in the interim report, JMG conducted a separate evaluation of its MCE-funded efforts. Therefore, the findings detailed in this report are based on CBO and ELO-engaged youth, program coordinators, and employers that engaged in DIP evaluation activities and findings should be viewed within this context.

## What MCE-Engaged Youth and Employers Gained

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Across its two years, the MCE program supported positive short-term outcomes for participants, which translates into potential long-term contributions to Maine's workforce. More specifically, **youth participants gained:**

- ▶ New academic experiences and pathways, including hands-on and community-based learning opportunities that were otherwise unavailable.
- ▶ 21st Century job-readiness skills and abilities, such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills.
- ▶ Social and emotional growth through increased confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and self-efficacy.
- ▶ New adult connections and support that helped them take concrete steps towards their future goals.
- ▶ Clarity about future career plans and post-secondary pathways.
- ▶ Optimism and excitement about their futures.
- ▶ Job offers and employment.

**Employers also gained positive outcomes** as a result of engaging with MCE programming, including:

- ▶ An expanded workforce and pipeline that they helped to develop.
- ▶ New and expanded connections with schools, community-based organizations, and the next generation of Maine workers.

## What Makes the MCE Approach Work Best

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While the MCE program was successful for many reasons, certain program elements made it work best. First and foremost, the **funded program coordinator role** was a cornerstone of the program and was critical to its success. This role was embedded in all five essential program aspects which included:

- ▶ **Structured and ongoing support to participants**, and pathways to meaningful career exploration opportunities that matched youth aspirations.
- ▶ **A clear orientation to program expectations and responsibilities** through ongoing support for youth and employers from program coordinators.

- ▶ The **adaptability of program coordinators** to meet the needs of the communities they served while still adhering to program requirements.
- ▶ **The compensation of youth**, especially those from low-income families, which increased equitable access to work experiences and enabled more employers to offer work opportunities.
- ▶ **Deep relationships and collaboration** between coordinators, schools, and community partners which facilitated formalized programming and pathways and ensured career exploration opportunities continued.

## The Effect of Rurality

Maine's rural geography presents unique challenges and disparities between rural and urban populations, making it essential to build opportunities in rural Maine — a goal of the Maine DOE ELO expansion. Results from the youth exit survey demonstrated:

- ▶ **Rural youth had greater engagement in the job search process than urban youth.**
  - ▶ Urban youth were more likely to be motivated to participate in the MCE program by hands-on learning, receiving help with graduation or attaining a HiSET, and earning a career certification than rural youth.
  - ▶ Rural youth were more likely to have shorter work experiences (0-6 weeks in length) than youth from urban areas (7+ weeks in length).
- ▶ While all youth experienced growth in 21st Century skills, **youth from rural areas reported slightly lower positive program impacts compared to their urban counterparts**, particularly in the areas of communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. Rural youth also reported slightly less clarity and optimism around their future goals.
- ▶ In general, **both urban and rural youth demonstrated strong growth through participation** in the MCE program, and this growth is likely to become more equitable through continued program expansion and adaption, especially in rural areas.