



Testimony of Melissa Hackett  
Communications and Policy Associate, Maine Children's Alliance  
Testimony on LD 1318, An Act to Increase High School Graduation Rates for Students Experiencing  
Homelessness or in Foster Care  
April 26, 2021

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Melissa Hackett and I am submitting testimony in support of LD 1318, on behalf of The Maine Children's Alliance, is a statewide, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies and best practices that improve the lives of Maine's children, youth, and families.

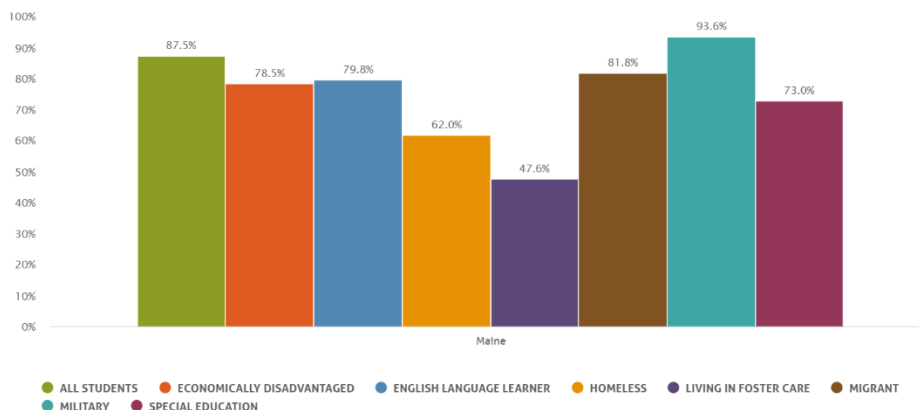
Today, to gain employment that pays a living wage and supports a family, a credential of value or college degree is increasingly necessary. Yet, there are still many young people in Maine who struggle to even graduate from high school. To ensure our youth can go on to higher education and obtain the jobs we need filled by a skilled workforce in the future, it is critical that they start with a solid educational foundation by graduating from high school.

Students who graduate from high school have higher wages, lower unemployment and are less likely to need public assistance than those who do not graduate. Their long-term physical and mental health is also better. Over time, Maine's graduation rates have improved; yet there are still young people in circumstances that make them significantly less likely to graduate on time, or at all.

For youth in foster care, they often face the social and educational disruption of multiple placements. With each move, these young people are forced to leave friends and places they have become familiar with, and start over again. In changing schools, they also face the academic challenge of aligning themselves with new curricula and educators. This disruption can cause serious delays and impediments to their ability to graduate on time, and with each barrier they face, it can become too difficult for them to graduate at all.

Youth experiencing homelessness face similar circumstances of disruption in their education, and often lack the stability of home and family to help support them through these difficult transitions. It is worth highlighting the point that changing schools and friends, as well as homes, would be immensely difficult for any adolescent to navigate. Add to that the additional trauma and instability, as well as lack of supportive adults to help guide them, and it becomes clear just how difficult it would be for young people experiencing homelessness or foster care to make it through to graduation with their peers.

Of all the "priority populations" of young people, homeless and foster youth in Maine represent the lowest four-year graduation rates. For 2019, the graduation rate for homeless youth was 62% and the rate for foster youth was 48%, compared to a significantly higher statewide average of 88% ([KIDS COUNT Data Center](#)).



### State High School Graduation Rates By Priority Populations (Percent) - 2019

Maine Children's Alliance  
 KIDS COUNT Data Center, [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org)  
 A project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

It is our shared responsibility to ensure that students whose lives are significantly disrupted by a lack of permanent housing or family, are not negatively impacted in their academic success as well. Rather than placing the responsibility on students in these situations to navigate the complexities of their education as a result of the disruption they have faced in their home lives, school administrators and the Department of Education should take the lead in removing barriers to these young people in gaining the critical achievement of a high school diploma.

Without a high school diploma, and without the higher education and job opportunities that opens up, adolescents moving into adulthood can become disconnected from education and employment. Consider the number of young people in Maine who do not attend school and are not working (ages 16-19) – for 2019, that number was 1,947 ([2021 Maine KIDS COUNT Data Book](#)). That is around 3 percent of Maine teens who are not connected to the education or employment that will help them achieve success as they enter adulthood. In an aging state like Maine, it is critical to our future success that all young people can find success as adults in Maine's workforce, and as leaders and parents in our communities

We must acknowledge the greater need for support for academic achievement for young people who have or are currently experiencing the trauma of homelessness and foster care – and provide it. They are a special population of young people because of their unique experiences, and they need and deserve our special attention and support if they are to be successful.

By providing critical supports, we can ensure these youth who have already experienced life and educational disruption, can graduate alongside their peers, and move forward as adults engaged and employed in our communities. And that is a benefit to us all. Thank you.