



DEMOCRATS *for*
EDUCATION REFORM

Governors Program **Maine**

A Note From Our CEO

Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's traditional advantage on education has eroded, slipping from a 26-point lead over Republicans to now trailing by three. Voters' message is clear: they want something different, but Democrats have offered more of the same.

Maine illustrates both the challenge and the opportunity ahead. The state's scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) plummeted about twice as much as the average decline between 2013 and 2024, putting it in the [bottom 10 states](#) for 4th-grade performance and resulting in some of the worst [demographically adjusted scores](#) in the nation. Nearly [one in four](#) of Maine's students is chronically absent from school and the state has the [lowest college enrollment](#) in New England. Complicating Maine's challenges, [two-thirds](#) of its schools are classified as rural, making economies of scale and reforms at the school district level [more challenging](#). Without renewed urgency and a forward-looking vision, Maine risks the futures of thousands of its students.

But Maine's challenges are not unique—and other states are showing that progress is possible when leaders act with urgency and focus on results. While many of these efforts have taken root in Republican-led states, Democratic governors and candidates, including in Maine, can show how reform can succeed in small towns and rural communities as well as cities. With the right leadership, Maine can build an education system that delivers excellence and opportunity to every corner of the state and demonstrate that Democrats are ready to lead with ideas that work for every child.



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About This Report

This report outlines a policy framework for improving education in Maine through innovation, accountability, and choice. It is intended to inform candidates, campaign staff, and policymakers about both the current state of Maine's education system and the opportunity ahead.

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Overview of Maine's educational landscape and opportunity for renewed progress;

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Organized around three pillars—Innovation, Accountability, and Choice—that together create a roadmap for measurable improvement; and

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Summary of recent polling of Maine voters and communication insights.

Executive Summary

Today, more than 170,000 K–12 students depend on Maine’s schools to prepare them for college, career, and life. But recent results show that student achievement is not keeping pace with expectations. When adjusted for demographics, Maine ranks near the bottom on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card. These rankings follow a downward trend of the state’s NAEP scores over the last decade, during which its average scores dropped about twice the amount of the national average. Worse still, the achievement gap between Maine’s highest and lowest performers is widening, exacerbating longstanding educational inequities.

Maine’s declining academic performance may be attributed in part to limited adoption of evidence-based reading and math practices. In 2024, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) [graded the state as “Unacceptable”](#) on every selected indicator of strong literacy policies, and [all but one](#) indicator of strong math policies.

Despite its troubling results on the Nation’s Report Card and outdated instructional practices, Maine offers limited high-quality school choice options for families to seek out better educational opportunities. Due to a state cap, it has just [nine charter schools](#). This, along with the state’s [significant rurality](#), means families have little choice in their children’s quality of education.

Maine is at a crucial moment. The state needs a leader who can not only implement urgently needed reforms but also demonstrate to the nation that sustained commitment and smart policymaking can deliver high expectations, modern learning opportunities, and lasting success for every student in Maine.

Maine at a Glance

- **Public School Student Enrollment:** [171,059](#)
- **Chronic Absenteeism Rate:** [24%](#)
- **Economically Disadvantaged Students:** [45%](#)
- **Multilingual Learner Students:** [5%](#)
- **Students with Disabilities:** [20%](#)
- **Public Schools that are Rural:** [68%](#)
- **Students with College-Ready SAT Scores:** [44%](#)
- **High School Graduation Rate:** [86%](#)
- **Two- and Four-Year College Enrollment:** [41%](#)
- **Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings:**
 - 4th Grade Reading: 47th
 - 4th Grade Math: 47th
 - 8th Grade Reading: 44th
 - 8th Grade Math: 41st

Recommendations At-A-Glance

Innovation

1. Support and Reward Great Educators

Adopt strategic staffing models and targeted pay incentives to attract and retain excellent teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects while rewarding those who drive stronger student outcomes.

2. Expand, Strengthen, and Evaluate Dual Enrollment Pathways

Ensure every Maine student can earn transferable college credits by increasing high school participation in dual enrollment and evaluating outcomes for dual enrollment programs.

3. Invest in Innovative School Models

Create a task force to craft a cohesive strategy for supporting and scaling high-quality charter schools, early college high schools, magnet schools, rural collaboratives, and microschools to expand opportunity, accelerate innovation, and align K–12 learning with college and career success.

Accountability

1. Expand Evidence-Based Literacy Supports Across K–12

Expand evidence-based literacy supports across K–12 through larger investments in early screening, coaching, interventions, and curriculum-aligned professional development, as well as greater emphasis on 3rd- and 4th-grade reading scores.

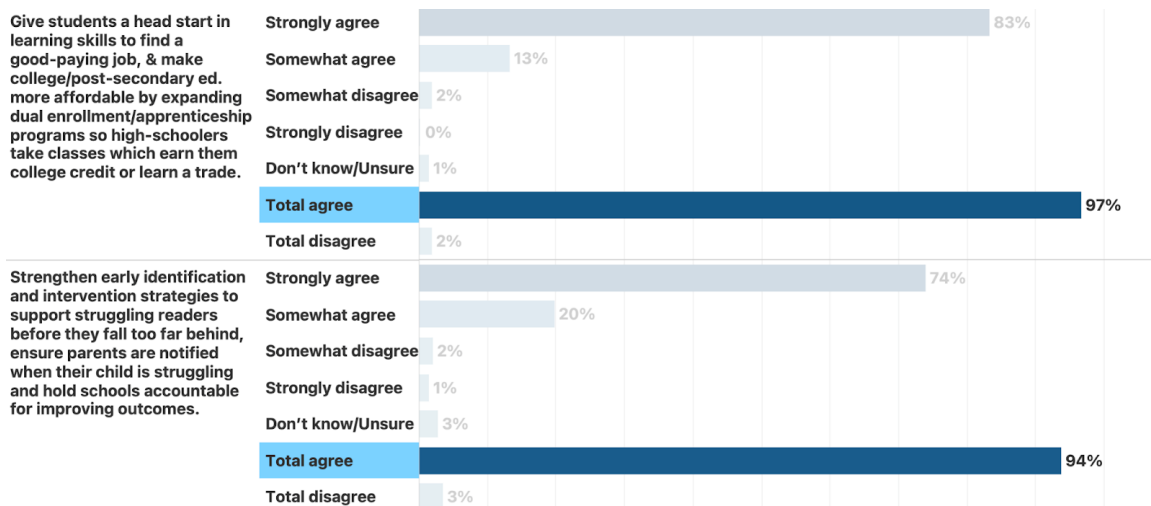
2. Invest in High-Quality Math Curricula and Professional Development

Invest in math education through the adoption of high-quality math curricula across all grades, including professional development for teachers. Develop systems to identify and support students who are below grade level.

3. Ensure High Standards and Emphasize Results in Accountability

Align school report cards with rigorous NAEP benchmarks and enforce clear, transparent accountability for all schools—especially those that are chronically underperforming—while empowering families and communities to help drive improvement.

Democratic primary voters overwhelmingly favor strong academic initiatives: In recent polling, we found that an overwhelming majority of voters support dual enrollment and reading intervention strategies (97% and 94%) as ways to improve student outcomes and opportunities.



Choice

1. Overhaul Charter School Policy

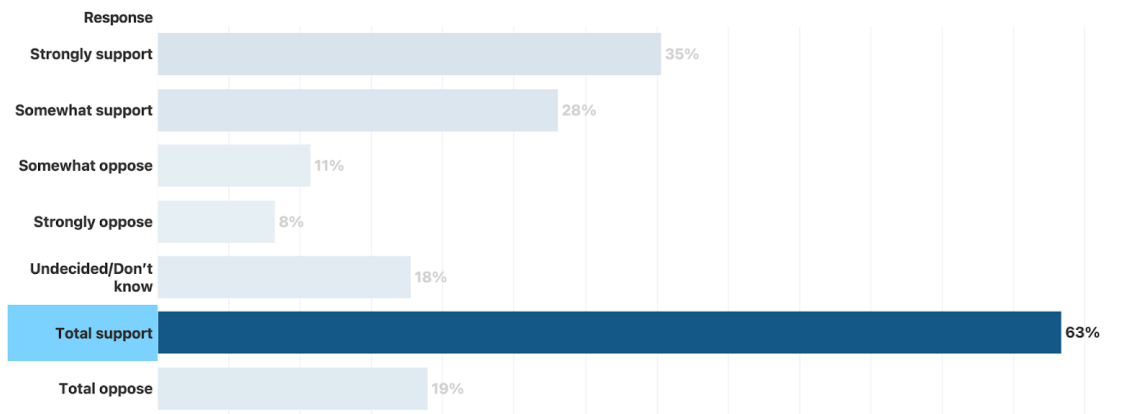
To create more public school choice options, the next governor should work to advance a few key charter policies. First, Maine should raise its cap on charter schools. Second, the state should allow a higher percentage of students to attend charter schools, rather than capping charter enrollment based on district size.

2. Leverage the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program (FTCS)

Use the new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program to expand tutoring and out-of-school time opportunities, directing resources to under-resourced students and trusted community organizations that provide academic and enrichment support.

A majority of Democratic primary voters want Governor Mills to opt in to the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship: After hearing a brief description, 63% of Democrats support the program. Support is especially strong with Democratic women +54 (69% support / 15% oppose) while support among men is slightly less overwhelming +30 (55% support / 25% oppose).

Now, as you may know, Governor Janet Mills has the opportunity to opt the state into a federal tax credit program that would allow families with students in public or private school to use money raised through federal tax credits to help pay for academic tutoring, test prep, special-needs services, private school tuition and other K-12 educational expenses. Would you support or oppose Governor Mills opting Maine into this program?



Innovation

Maine’s next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life. In order to do so, they must embrace a spirit of innovation that allows all students to flourish. The next governor of Maine should usher in a new era of education innovation by taking the following steps:



Recommendation 1: Support and reward great educators. In order to create incentives to increase equity and excellence, we recommend the use of [strategic staffing models](#) to accelerate learning and shrink outcome gaps, [supplemental pay](#) for teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., high-poverty and rural schools) and subjects (e.g., special education, English Learner, and STEM classrooms), and additional pay incentives tied to student academic and non-academic outcomes.

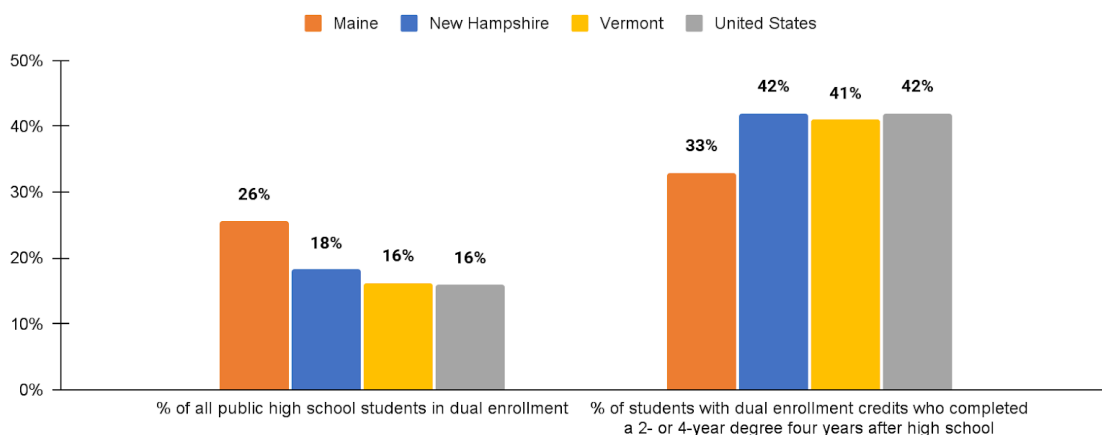
An example of innovative policy directly impacting teaching and learning, North Carolina’s [comprehensive redesign](#) of the state’s teaching profession has included the adoption of a strategic staffing model—[BEST NC Advanced Teaching Roles](#)—which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher experiences in participating schools. Students in schools with the model had an additional 1 month of growth in math and science compared to comparable schools without the model. Similarly, a team teaching model in Arizona—[Next Education Workforce](#)—has led to an additional 1.4 months of reading growth for students as well as higher educator effectiveness, lower turnover, and increased job satisfaction.

In addition, given the high degree of rurality in Maine and the [greater challenges](#) rural schools tend to face with teacher recruitment and retention, we recommend advancing a state funding initiative to provide supplemental pay for teachers to work in hard-to-staff rural schools. Colorado has [targeted rural shortages](#) by paying teachers \$10,000 to work in rural communities for a year with partial funding from the state.



Recommendation 2: Expand, strengthen, and evaluate dual enrollment pathways. Maine has relatively high participation rates in dual enrollment programs, but only a third of dual enrollment students earn an associate’s or bachelor’s degree within four years after high school. This suggests that earned credits are not translating into faster completion of a degree or savings in college costs. Identifying and mitigating the causes of low attainment rates should be a priority for the next administration.

Maine's Outcomes for Dual Enrollment Are Disappointing



Sources: [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Survey](#); [Community College Research Center](#)

Given Maine's relatively low rate of postsecondary degree completion for dual enrollment students, the state should implement an annual evaluation of dual enrollment programs, participation, and outcomes, disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and school district, and make the findings easily accessible. This analysis should consider whether dual enrollment credits are transferring for both general education and major courses as well as whether dual enrollment courses are providing the rigor and quality needed to prepare students to succeed in college.

We also recommend developing structured pathways that lead students toward college credentials or degrees, paired with strong advising and counseling to ensure quality and alignment. For example, [key policies recently enacted in Indiana](#) have catalyzed the development of a robust college and career pathways program that links learning in high school to college and career options, leading to positive outcomes for learners. More assertively, Maine could pass legislation requiring every high school in the state to provide the opportunity to earn postsecondary college or workforce credentials to every student in the state.



Recommendation 3: Invest in a range of innovative school models. We recommend providing financial and regulatory support for high-quality charter schools, early college high schools, magnet schools, rural collaboratives, full service community schools, microschools, and other models outside traditional schools that allow for faster, community-driven, and more iterative innovation. The next governor of Maine should create a task force to craft a cohesive strategy to build these learning ecosystems, aligning all partners around shared K–12 goals.

For instance, graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than nonparticipants and get there faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are [14 percentage points more likely](#) (68% versus 54%) to go on to college compared to control-matched peers, and [14 percentage points more likely](#) (58% versus 44%) to persist into a second year of college—a strong predictor of eventual graduation.

Accountability

Maine’s next governor must create a shared sense of urgency about creating a school system that achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups.

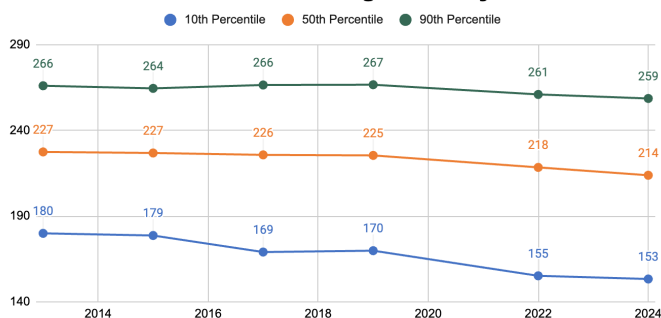
Maine’s educational outcomes are alarming: When adjusted for comparison with demographically similar peers, Maine’s NAEP scores are among the worst in the nation. Even without demographic adjustments, the state’s 4th-grade scores rank in the bottom quintile nationally and its 8th-grade scores are below the national midpoint. In the past decade, scores on all four tests have declined 13 to 16 points.

Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings (2024)				
	4th Grade Reading	4th Grade Math	8th Grade Reading	8th Grade Math
Maine	47th	47th	44th	41st
New Hampshire	24th	40th	20th	31st
Vermont	46th	48th	34th	35th

Source: [Urban Institute](#) (2024)

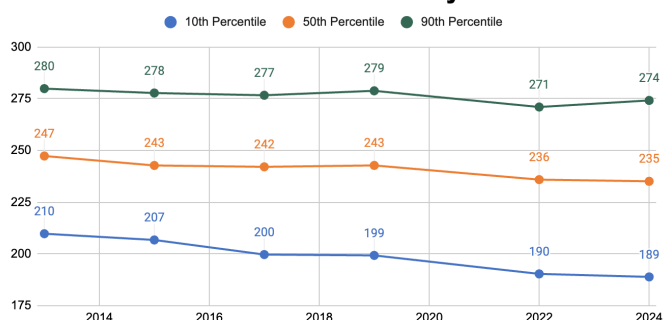
Worse still, the achievement gap between Maine’s highest and lowest performers on the NAEP is widening, exacerbating longstanding educational inequities. A generation of students will be left behind if Maine does not continue to invest in curricular reform and robust accountability measures.

Maine’s 4th Grade NAEP Reading Scores by Percentile



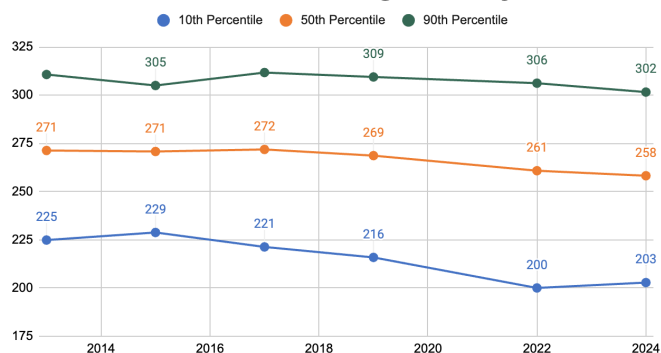
Source: [The Nation’s Report Card](#) (2013–2024)

Maine’s 4th Grade NAEP Math Scores by Percentile



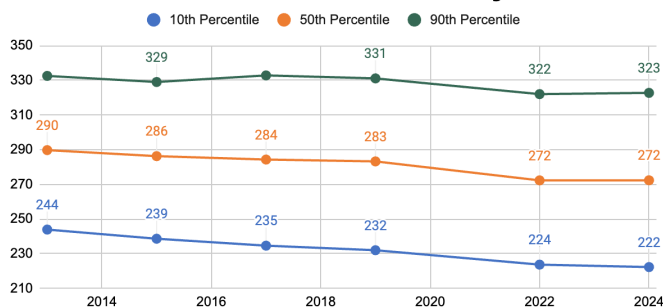
Source: [The Nation’s Report Card](#) (2013–2024)

Maine’s 8th Grade NAEP Reading Scores by Percentile



Source: [The Nation’s Report Card](#) (2013–2024)

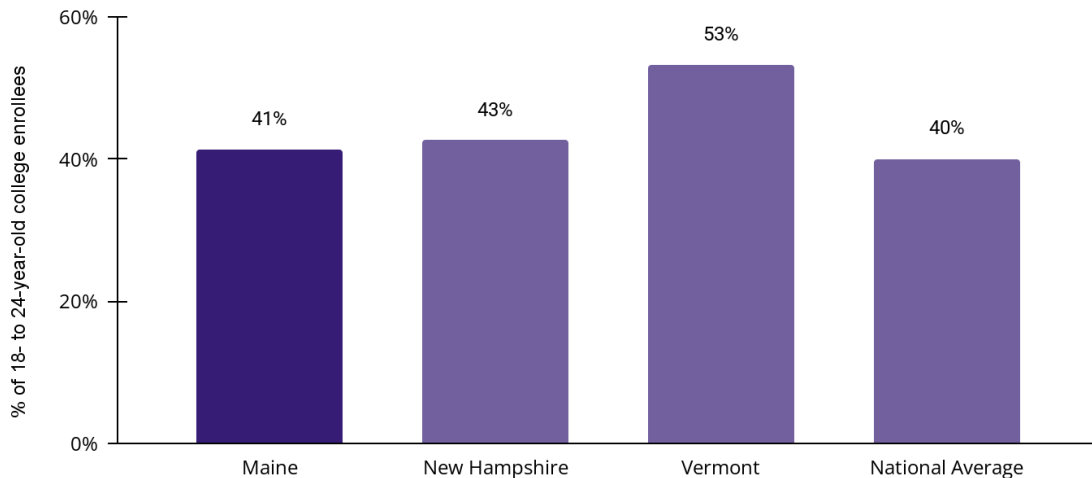
Maine’s 8th Grade Math NAEP Scores by Percentile



Source: [The Nation’s Report Card](#) (2013–2024)

When it comes to postsecondary outcomes, Maine is fairly average. It trails just slightly below the national average (87%) for graduation rate (86%) and just above the national average (40%) for college enrollment (41%). Relative to its neighboring states, however, it lags behind, giving it the lowest college enrollment in New England. In 2025, less than half (44%) of the state’s high school graduates met the College and Career Readiness Benchmarks on the SAT.

Maine lags behind its peers on college enrollment



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2021-22)



Recommendation 1: Expand evidence-based literacy supports across K–12. Given its NAEP rankings for 4th and 8th grade reading, Maine has significant work ahead on literacy. In 2024, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) [graded the state as “Unacceptable”](#) on every selected indicator of strong literacy policies, including teacher preparation, licensure tests, high-quality instructional materials, and professional development. ExcelsinEd had a [similar evaluation](#) on Maine’s implementation of literacy policies.

As recommended by NCTQ, Maine should immediately adopt rigorous policies aligning teacher preparation, licensure, curriculum and instructional materials, and teacher professional development with the [Science of Reading](#), which is the most well-proven method of teaching reading. Maine has recently taken action on this front by developing a [state action plan](#) and [providing funding](#) for high-quality instructional materials and teacher professional development, but stronger requirements and attention to implementation are critical.

Strong [pillars of policy](#) supporting this evidence-based approach to reading include:

- **Teacher preparation, licensure, and ongoing professional development** aligned to the Science of Reading (including the use of literacy coaches)
- **Universal reading screeners and parental notification** of student results three times per year using approved assessment tools
- **High-quality instructional materials** that focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (while eliminating three-cueing)
- **Intervention and 3rd grade retention as a last resort**, only coming after parental notification, tutoring, individualized reading plans, and other supportive interventions—some of which may be funded through scholarship granting organizations supported by the new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program

[Mississippi's](#) spectacular improvement in NAEP reading scores should be a model for Maine. Relying on federally supported research from the Institute of Education Sciences, the state invested in a curriculum based on the Science of Reading, provided K–3 teachers with training and support to help students master reading by the end of third grade, and provided targeted support for struggling readers. Mississippi's [Literacy-Based Promotion Act](#) also included provisions for reading coaches, parent communication, individual reading plans, and other supportive measures.



Recommendation 2: Invest in high-quality math curricula and professional development.

Maine has similar work to do regarding evidence-based math instruction. While Governor Mills released a [state numeracy action plan](#) similar to her literacy plan, its details are limited, creating significant opportunities for the next governor to develop a more robust and ambitious plan for improving math education in the state. Similar to literacy, NCTQ offers [specific recommendations](#) for improving Maine's approach to math instruction focused on standards and review of teacher preparation programs, a strong math licensure test, high-quality curricular materials and implementation, and ongoing professional development.

Alabama made [significant investments](#) in evidence-based math instruction and has seen notable improvements since then, making the [largest jump in the nation](#) on the 2024 NAEP results. Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Indiana [have also implemented](#) strong reforms.



Recommendation 3: Ensure high standards and emphasize results in accountability.

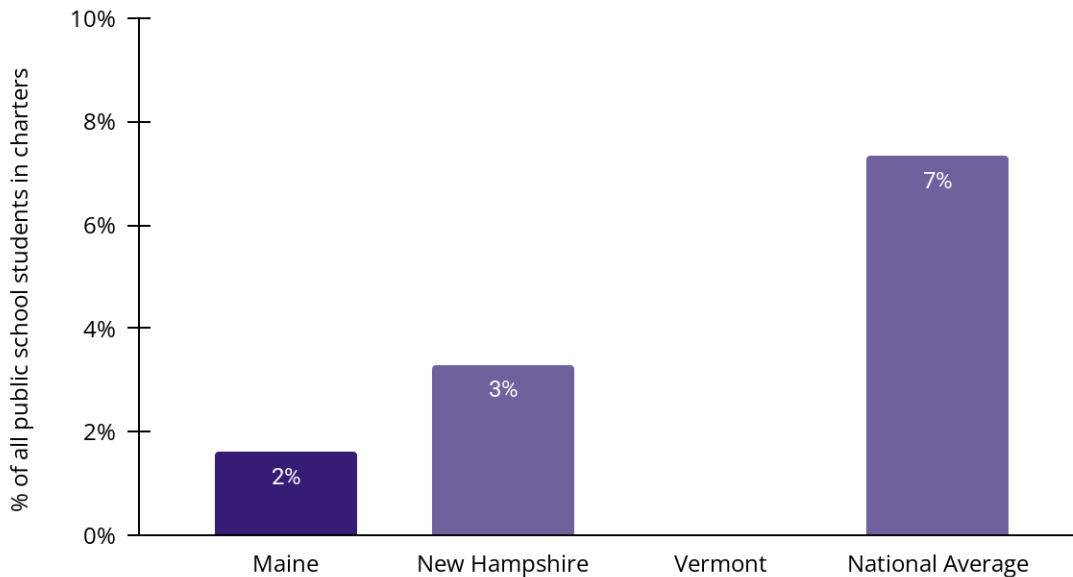
The next governor of Maine should treat the state's dismal NAEP scores like the emergency that it is. They should introduce stronger reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools, but especially chronically underperforming schools. Legislation should provide clearer, more stringent guidance, aligned with the conditions for entering into and out of various levels of state support or intervention. Lasting improvements in education depend on centering the affected community, so that families who have too often been left out of decision-making can play a meaningful role in shaping the development of a better educational ecosystem.

Turnaround laws in states like [Massachusetts](#) and takeover efforts in cities like [New Orleans](#) tend to be more successful when paired with a broader reform agenda including funding reform, tracking outcomes beyond high school, and innovative approaches like New Orleans's creation of the nation's most intensive market-based school system.

Choice

Maine has an opportunity to provide far more high-quality school choice options to families. At present, Maine caps the number of charter schools in the state and also caps student enrollment based on the size of the noncharter authorizing school district. As a result, it currently has just [nine charter schools](#), most of which are in the southern part of the state. Changing state policy to enable more charter schools to open could create more public school choice options especially in the more rural northern part of the state. These charters could, for example, [be focused on agriculture or forestry](#), centering the assets of these communities in student learning and preparing students to move into these local industries.

Maine has far fewer students in charter schools than average



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2022–2023; Note: Data not available for Vermont)



Recommendation 1: Lift the charter school cap. Maine has imposed an unnecessary cap on charter schools in the state, denying students access to educational options that can improve their future. Ideally, the state should lift the cap, but if that is too large a lift, Maine should consider the approach taken by Massachusetts (which has its own cap on charters). Massachusetts [charter school law](#) provides for a higher limit in school districts ranked in the lowest 10 percent of all statewide student performance scores based on the state assessment results from the two most recent school years. Maine should also grant public institutions of higher education the power to authorize charter schools.



Recommendation 2: Raise the cap on charter school student enrollment. Current law in Maine limits charter school enrollment during a school’s first three years to a percentage of the district’s noncharter public school population, effectively capping student access. The state should consider raising this percentage to allow more students to attend charter schools in their early years of operation to allow students and families more immediate access to different educational opportunities.



Recommendation 3: Use the new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship (FTSC) program to expand access to tutoring and out-of-school time programs. The new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program represents an opportunity to expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs and for accelerating learning through evidence-based tutoring for students who need it the most. We recommend embracing the FTSC program and designing it to serve under-resourced students and families in public and private schools by providing free services through scholarship granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations and other institutions that provide academic and non-academic support to K–12 students. [Out-of-school time programming](#) provides academic enrichment and innovative learning opportunities for young people to build durable skills. It also provides working class families with additional child care support during work hours, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on the weekends.

Moving **Forward**

The next governor has a chance to transform education in Maine, from the first day a child enters school to the skills and opportunities they leave with upon graduation. By embracing innovation that opens doors for every student, ensuring schools deliver strong results, and expanding high-quality options for families, the next governor can build a brighter future. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across Maine will thrive for generations to come.

Key Data Insights and Communication Strategies for Maine Democratic Primary Electorate:

Recent polling of likely 2026 Democratic primary voters in Maine reveals a strong appetite for new education ideas rooted in results and opportunity. Voters see better schools as key to economic mobility, express broad support for innovation and choice within public education.

Insight 1: Framing Education Reform as an Economic Issue

Data:

- Voters were asked whether or not they agree with a series of proposals the next Governor could use to improve education including increasing teacher pay, improving teacher preparation, expanding dual enrollment programs, and early intervention.
 - The most favorable option voters agreed with (97%) was giving students a head start through initiatives such as increased dual enrollment, trade programs, and making higher education more affordable.
 - The second most agreeable was strengthening early identification to support struggling readers and increased accountability surrounding literacy, which 94% supported.

Implication:

Education reform should be framed as an economic issue. Emphasize that improving schools is not about managing decline, but about growing opportunity, expanding horizons, and restoring optimism for the next generation.

Insight 2: Support for the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program

Data:

- Sixty-three percent (63%) of voters were supportive of Mills opting Maine into the **Federal Tax Credit Scholarship** program, to help families pay for various educational expenses they may face with only 27% opposed.
 - Women were especially supportive (69%), as well as voters likely to have a college degree (67%).

Implication:

Leaders should message participation in the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program as a way to deliver on voter priorities, expand access to tutoring and enrichment programs, and ensure equitable implementation that benefits underserved families.