

# Cultivating Mattering For Maine Youth

Maine Resilience Building Network  
Thought Leader Roundtables  
December 3 and 9, 2020  
Summary and Recommendations

**BUILDING RESILIENCE. BUILDING HOPE.**

---

[www.maineresilience.org](http://www.maineresilience.org)



**Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth  
Maine Resilience Building Network (MRBN)  
Thought Leader Roundtables  
December 3 and 9, 2020  
Summary and Recommendations**

**The Need to Cultivate a Sense of Mattering in Maine’s Youth**

Building connections, such as positive relationships with adults outside the home, increases the capacity to grow resilience and contributes to the equitable well-being and health of our children. Framed in a collective impact approach, MRBN is leading the initiative, ***Cultivate Mattering in Maine’s Youth***. MRBN is building a cross-sector collaboration with state and local governments, business leaders, community organizations and educators to move this work forward.

The Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) is designed to quantify the health and health-related behaviors and attitudes of Maine’s youth. The survey is implemented as a collaboration between the Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Maine Department of Education (DoE).

In the 2019 MIYHS, when asked *“Do you agree or disagree that in your community you feel like you matter to other people?”*, **only 59.4% of middle school students strongly agreed or agreed. Only 56.4% of high school students reported they felt they mattered.** When asked, *“Did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing some usual activities?”*, an alarming 1 in 4 (24.8%) middle schoolers and nearly 1 in 3 (32.1%) high school students responded “Yes.”

MRBN’s goal is to impact the perception of youth in Maine and to create a culture where youth matter in Maine, long term beginning with measurable results in the 2023 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey reporting an improvement in the mattering factor to 73% of youth feeling they matter in their community. This 3-Year improvement will benchmark lasting change.

There is a lot of pain in Maine. For years in the MIYHS, youth have reported feeling sad or hopeless or that they don’t matter. From this data we also know that seriously considering suicide has been a consistent trend and with as many as 26% of the youth, even in children as young as middle school. These statistics are worse among certain populations, including those who identify as LGBTQ and in some of Maine’s counties. Unfortunately, the trend has only become worse in recent years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In recognition of this data, and of the importance of the protective factors of mattering and social connectedness, MRBN launched the ***Cultivating Youth Mattering in Maine*** initiative in the Fall of 2020.

- An Op-ed piece authored by MRBN’s Executive Director and Board Chair, “Maine Voices: It’s up to community to make young people feel that they matter”, was published in the Portland Press Herald on October 21, 2020.
- On November 12 and 13, 2020, MRBN held its Annual Meeting, focusing on Cultivating Mattering in Maine’s Youth. Keynote addresses by Dr. Christina Bethell of Johns Hopkins University, Bloomberg School of Public Health, focused on “The Science of Mattering”, attended by 130 people over two days.
- On December 3 and 9, 2020, over 170 people attended Thought Leaders Roundtables.

- A series of nine virtual Community Conversations, being held in public health districts around the state on “Mattering for Maine Youth” began on January 26, 2021 and continues through March 22, 2021.

### Thought Leader Roundtables

MRBN convened Thought Leader Roundtables on *Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth* on December 3 and 9, 2020. The Thought Leaders included state government leaders, educators and educational administrators, business leaders, representatives of philanthropic organizations, health providers, advocates for priority populations, and subject matter experts. The full list of Thought Leaders is provided at the end of this report. The sessions were facilitated by consultant Carole Martin. Thought Leaders engaged in rich conversation on Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth, supplemented by active engagement by participants in the webinar chat section. In all, more than 170 people participated.

This report covers the discussion and themes of the Thought Leader panelists but does not include content from the webinar chat. The chat section, however, served as a networking mechanism, fostering connections among participants throughout the state.

The discussion was wide-ranging, spanning topics such as the role of the business sector; school-community linkages; engaging youth and parents in the process; providing support for parents, caregivers and educators; youth advocacy; measurement of mattering; policy approaches to enhance mattering; culture and equity; and the impact of social determinants of health among others. Salient themes of the discussions and related comments of the Thought Leaders are provided below.

To kick off the discussion, the facilitator asked panelists, ***“Who is one person outside your immediate family who “saw” you - really “got” you - when you were a teen? How did they demonstrate this to you - how did you know?”***

- “a girl scout leader who motivated us with humor”
- “a science teacher who, upon seeing my messy locker for which I had been humiliated about, said- ‘genius is rarely tidy’, which sparked hope in me”
- “a teacher who always said hello and asked how I was doing- for years”
- “a teacher who taught me the game of chess- helped me with thinking ahead and planning”
- “an aunt, a relative aside from my own parents”
- “...the neighbor down the street, who always took the time to see me and ask how things were going...‘front porch mentorship’, instead of retreating to our back yards...”

One person had a hard time identifying someone and realized it wasn’t until she was much older that someone made her feel like she mattered.

### School and Community Linkages

The discussions featured numerous comments regarding the interactive roles of schools and communities as key linkages for community connectedness and youth mattering.

- **“We need to rebuild community and community networks.** We need to rethink the schools - schools belong to community. **Take down the walls between school and community.** Students can be contributing within the community at a young age. Find ways for students and community to mix at early ages...”

- “Communities need to understand the role of its place within the community. **Taxes = schools = public education = fabric of our communities. If a person pays taxes and has no children in schools- they support community well-being.** Need to make this message clearer in relation to mattering.”
- “We need kids to be a part of our community from early ages. We are aging in Maine. They need to know - “We need you”. There are not enough people in Maine communities for them not to matter. Need to find ways outside of schools for youth to connect with community. “
- “Develop spaces where youth can spend more time outside of schools. Being brought into conversations in gathering spaces that can connect youth to adults in different ways – outside school requirements”.
- “There are anchors in the community- anchor establishments- schools- **libraries-** libraries are becoming a place where people and youth hang out- judgement free. Some libraries are hiring social workers.”
- “We have to be cognizant of how much is already placed on educators. This is community work – **how can this be done in community?**”

### **Youth Voice, Youth Advocacy and Engagement**

The discussions featured a number of comments on the importance of youth voice, advocacy and engagement in enhancing the culture of mattering.

- “To do this work, teachers could have common language- tool kits to build mattering. Develop common understanding. In this work, we need to think about the question Do you Matter? **What does that mean to young people? What do young people think about that question when they are answering?** In focus groups we should ask youth, what do you need? What is it that comes to mind when you know you matter?”
- “**We have to listen to youth** - really listen and be ready to listen. **Their voice matters** and **youth might not be ready to share.** **We need to create opportunities for trust building, thinking also about cultural sensitivities.** For marginalized youth, this will take a while - to build trust. “
- “**It is extremely important to get the youth voice. How do we engage youth that are not at the table? Equity- particularly for marginalized youth. Our youth should share how we get there.**”
- “We need to **break down hierarchy. Meet as peers, not elders.** I learn more from **listening, gaining input** (from youth).”
- “**Receiving the youth voice is important.** There is work being done presently where youth can participate in the legislative process in Augusta via Zoom to testify and share comments. Changes in the model were made due to the pandemic allowing wider participation. No travel required. **We need to elevate the youth voice** and the teacher voice. What would schools look like if we measured mattering? Trauma-sensitive schools. “
- “It is important to ensure that **youth are involved in the policy decisions.**”
- “Trust happens over time - **engaging youth needs to be meaningful. Youth voice matters.** It will take more time. It is meaningful to hear their voice over time. **We must act upon their feedback. Youth will need to see that their feedback matters to have trust built.** “

- “It takes time to build trust with young people. Need to get out of our own way. **Deep listening takes more time, it’s hard work, important.**”

### **Supporting Parents, Teachers, Youth Development Professionals and Caregivers**

- “Schools belong to the community. Afterschool programs should and could support parents. We also need to really listen to parents. We need them involved. **In these times- we need to understand- what is this pandemic’s effect on kids and families in the long-term?**”
- “Over time in my pediatrics practice there has been a noticeable and **steady increase in stressors and demands of parents and teachers. We need to support these people for youth to matter more... functional family support.** How do we support the adult infrastructure to support youth? **There has been exponential change over 20 years in the levels of stress for parents and families.**”
- “When we try to find ways to support parents and kids, **flexibility is the key.** We need to recognize that family units are different. In the work setting, **flexibility for families such as varying work hours is important to the mattering conversation.**”

### **Importance of Restorative Practices**

Several commented on the need to utilize restorative rather than punitive approaches in schools and with youth overall. We note that across Maine, schools and communities are learning about and using restorative justice practices. MRBN recently had a membership meeting including presentations on restorative justice.

- “Change the way that discipline happens in schools. Restorative.”

### **The Role of the Business Sector:**

Numerous comments focused on the potential valuable role of the business sector in influencing mattering within their companies, as well as in other sectors.

- “**We need to broaden our understanding of who’s responsible for mattering.** It can’t be delegated for example to the schools. As a CEO it is part of our business mission for employees to matter-. It is the key goal. **Businesses tend to accomplish what is focused on. If we can broaden the focus to include mattering as business leaders in Maine as a focus, it can create powerful change.**”
- “Business leaders must ask what is the highest mission and purpose of work? Highest calling? At our company, it is to advance the lives of the people doing the work - meaningful to the people who are working within the company. **The concept of mattering can advance when and if it is made a priority. We tend to achieve what we focus on in business.**”
- “At our company, our main goal is to measure for mattering. People need to agree that they are first trusted, respected, valued and heard.”
- “The business community can influence policymakers, legislators and others, if mobilized to do so.”

### **Trauma-informed and Resilience-based Systems**

Discussion included comments on the need for trauma-informed and resilience-based systems including school systems.

- “Schools are doing more work in being trauma-informed, trauma-responsive, restorative. More of this is

needed.”

- **“Love the idea of trauma sensitive schools.** Resilience focused. This would require everyone to be trained -- bus drivers, teachers, multi-tiered systems of support.”

### Measurement of Mattering

There was extensive discussion on the importance of developing alternative ways to measure success in school beyond standardized testing and academic outcomes, measurements that include a focus on mattering and social connectedness.

- **“Our current assessments in education really don’t matter. We have been reduced to outcomes-based education since 2000. We’re locked into the wrong metrics.** Current metrics create false importance. We are choosing the wrong things to focus on. **We need the full support of our business community to create the voice to push back on this.”**
- **“Bureaucracy is the unintended enemy of mattering.** Mattering needs to be local, intimate, agile- we’ve got to decentralize **and disrupt destructive models for reset.** The priority should be that on graduation day, every graduate can state they matter. Need to give up bureaucratic control.”
- “Everyone craves data. **We need new data points to measure success.** Let educators as the experts take back the ability to be creative and innovative. “
- “In education we can create indicators for standardized testing. **We need to look beyond academics. What do we need to know about how to measure mattering?** What are we not collecting for data that we could be collecting? What do we measure for social/emotional learning?”
- “Assess climate within schools. Many kids do not feel valued because of x, y, z – unique for different communities. **We need to find ways to value kids where kids are at. We need to broaden the perception of what is valuable in our society.”**
- “We assess academics in schools because it easy to measure. If we learned ways to assess and structure teachers’ professional development around mattering it may help. If educators had mattering built into their performance reviews, it would make mattering a priority. *What would it look like if kids evaluated teachers?*”

### Culture and Equity:

Discussants commented on the need to recognize culture and equity issues as we advance a culture of mattering.

- “It is important to ensure that **youth are involved in the policy decisions. Construct an environment where diversity matters. For example, calendars do not recognize diversity in holidays.** If a school was open on December 25, many would gasp. Unthinkable. Yet schools are open on many other calendar holidays that exist for people of color.”
- “How we treat white kids is different from how we treat kids of color. At an early age, 25-30% of black youth are incarcerated. We need to be really conscious of how we treat like kind infractions across youth- in communities of color same actions are criminalized.”
- “We need to incorporate equity in education- we need stories with people of color. Education that is diverse. In Waterville, there are 16.6% kids of color in schools. We need representation for communities of

color in the education materials.”

### **Social Determinants of Health**

A number of comments highlighted the critical importance of social determinants of health as key contextual issues in achieving well-being, community resilience and youth mattering in Maine. These issues need to be addressed at the policy and systems level.

- “When we talk about mattering, we need to think about the big things that parents are dealing with in Maine: **lack of stable housing, lack of healthcare, unstable families. We need to name these things in this discussion to improve the lives of families for parents and youth to know that they matter.**”
- “When we are talking about mattering and supporting families, **we need to think about the very basic of things: (1) Safe and stable housing (2) health and nutrition (3) the basic components of well-being and safety have to be there for people to know that they matter. The basics have to be in place to support mattering.**”

### **Additional Comments Provoking Thought**

- “In an indigenous population I work with, mentoring is not in their lexicon. Rather, the words ‘walk alongs’ is. That adults are walking alongside youth. It is a journey and not time-bound. As a community, perhaps we can make a difference by walking alongside youth.”
- “One thing we can do to broaden the idea of mattering is educate adults. Many adults simply don’t know how important it can be to say hello to a teen. If adults are educated to simply connect with youth it can make a difference. We can create personal self policies if we know it can make a difference to someone mattering.”
- “My local general store owners could give a master class on mattering. They know and engage with every person that comes through their doors – community-driven.”
- **“The research is clear on the most important protective factor for youth - one consistent and caring adult in the life of a youth. One adult + one adult = single largest protective factor. Mattering takes just one person in another person’s life.”**

### **Next Steps**

***Cultivate Mattering for Maine’s Youth*** envisions a shift in culture in Maine, going beyond a “program”. It advances an “upstream approach”, focusing on creating a culture of mattering throughout Maine, creating a more positive environment for Maine youth. A series of virtual Community Conversations on Mattering for Maine Youth is being held in public health districts around the state. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently published statements supporting the promotion of mattering and social connectedness:

“Connectedness is an important protective factor for youth that can reduce the likelihood of a variety of health risk behaviors. Connectedness refers to a sense of being cared for, supported, and belonging, and can be centered on feeling connected to school, family (i.e., parents and caregivers), or other important people and organizations in their lives. Youth who feel connected at school and home are less likely to experience negative health outcomes related to sexual risk, substance use, violence, and mental health.” (CDC, 2020)

Based on these discussions and other feedback received through the initiative to date, MRBN is committed to providing leadership in the following *Next Steps* to advance Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth:

- Convene discussion groups to listen to and learn from Maine youth about what mattering means to them, and how the community can enhance the culture of mattering
- Expand the initiative across more sectors by convening discussions with key leadership organization
- Develop tools and communication to support community connections to Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth
- Work with partners to explore ways to better measure mattering, including identifying different data points and methods of integrating these measures across sectors and communities

**Thought Leaders, December 3, 2020:**

Barrett Wilkinson-Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion-Portland Public Schools; Catharine Biddle-MRBN Board of Directors, Vice President-Associate Professor of Educational Leadership-College of Education and Human Development-University of Maine; Mike Felton-Superintendent-St. George Municipal School Unit; Ana Hicks-Senior Policy Analyst and Children’s Cabinet Coordinator-Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future State of Maine; Pender Makin-Commissioner, Maine Department of Education; Tara Williams-Executive Director-Maine Association for the Education of Young Children; Mary Bonauto-Civil Rights Project Director-GLBTQ Legal Advocates & Defenders; Kevin Hancock-Chairman + CEO- Hancock Lumber.

**Thought Leaders, December 9, 2020:**

Gordon Smith-Director of Opioid Response-State of Maine; Deborah Hagler, MD-Mid Coast Pediatrics-President AAP, Maine Chapter; Jason Judd-Executive Director Educate Maine; Todd A. Landry-Director-Office of Child & Family Services; Shanna Cox-President + CEO-Lewiston Auburn Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce; Erin Benson-Program Coordinator- Workforce Development and HEAP- Aroostook County Action Program; Sherry Pineau Brown-Educator-Waterville High School and MRBN Advisory Committee member; Morgan Hynd-Director-Bingham Program.