

# THE ASPIRATIONS INCUBATOR

## Investing in Rural Maine Youth





INITIATIVE IS  
NOT AN INBORN  
TRAIT BUT RATHER,  
DEVELOPS WITHIN  
YOUTHS' DAILY  
LIVES AS A RESULT  
OF STRONG  
AND EFFECTIVE  
RELATIONSHIPS  
WITH ADULTS  
AND PEERS,  
OPPORTUNITIES  
TO EXPLORE  
INTERESTS AND  
DEVELOP SKILLS,  
AND CHANCES FOR  
AUTONOMY AND  
RESPONSIBILITY.

READY, WILLING, AND ABLE: A DEVELOPMENTAL  
APPROACH TO COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS

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# THE CHALLENGE FOR RURAL YOUTH IN MAINE

Rural Maine is characterized by hundreds of small, hardworking communities surrounded by abundant forest and ocean resources - but also limited opportunities for employment and meaningful careers. The good-paying, lifelong jobs in mills and factories that once supported generations of rural Mainers have largely vanished from Maine's employment landscape, leaving behind scores of communities and the people who live in them.

More than half of the school-aged population in Maine lives in rural areas, and these students face different challenges than those faced by their urban and suburban peers. Rural youth often lack the opportunities and resources to aim high when considering their plans for life beyond high school. They are more likely to feel lonely and disconnected, and there are fewer supports and services available to help them.<sup>1</sup> The people, experiences, and opportunities frequently missing from rural Maine communities are the very means by which a young person can broaden their sense of possibility and imagine how to succeed in life and contribute to the world around them.

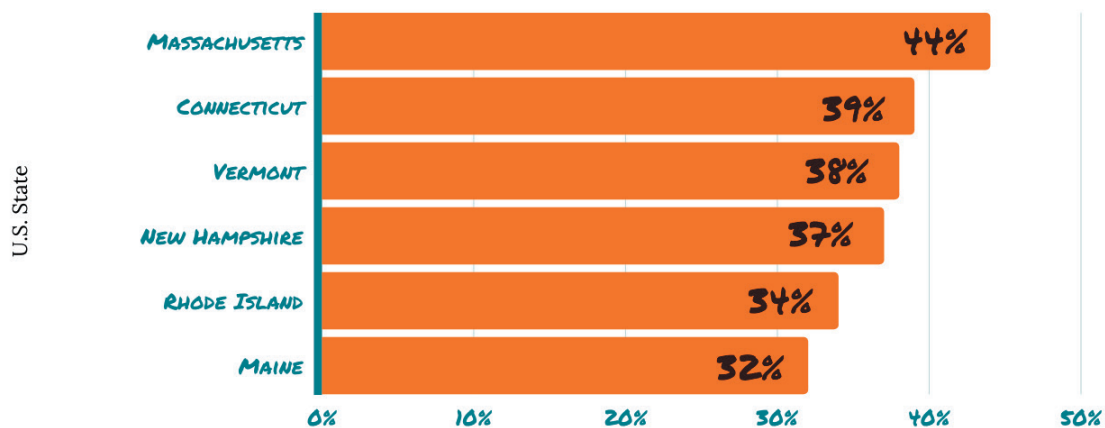
Post-high school education and training are increasingly mandatory for Maine's young people, as 21st century jobs require more technical expertise and critical thinking skills. Yet, too few of Maine's rural high school graduates seek post-secondary education and

training, and even fewer earn their degree or certificate. Only 32% of Maine residents over the age of 25 hold bachelors, advanced, or professional degrees compared with the rates in the neighboring states of Massachusetts (44%), Vermont (38%) and New Hampshire (37%).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, almost 121,000 Maine adults - about 11% of the adult population - started post-secondary education but did not complete a degree or certificate.<sup>3</sup> Maine's low post-secondary attainment rate discourages employers in the northeastern United States from establishing opportunities in rural Maine, threatens the future of Maine's rural communities, and further limits the prospects for Maine's rural youth.

Improving the prospects for Maine's rural economy, its communities, and the people who live in them starts with raising the aspirations of rural young people, building their resiliency, and broadening their horizons. This understanding led the Lerner Foundation to ask, *How do we do this? How do we equip them to meet the challenges of the future and provide them with the tools and opportunities to create productive, fulfilling lives in Maine or wherever they choose to make their place in the world?*

The Foundation's response gave rise to the Aspirations Incubator and a big bet on the young people of rural Maine.

## BACHELOR'S & HIGHER DEGREE ATTAINMENT

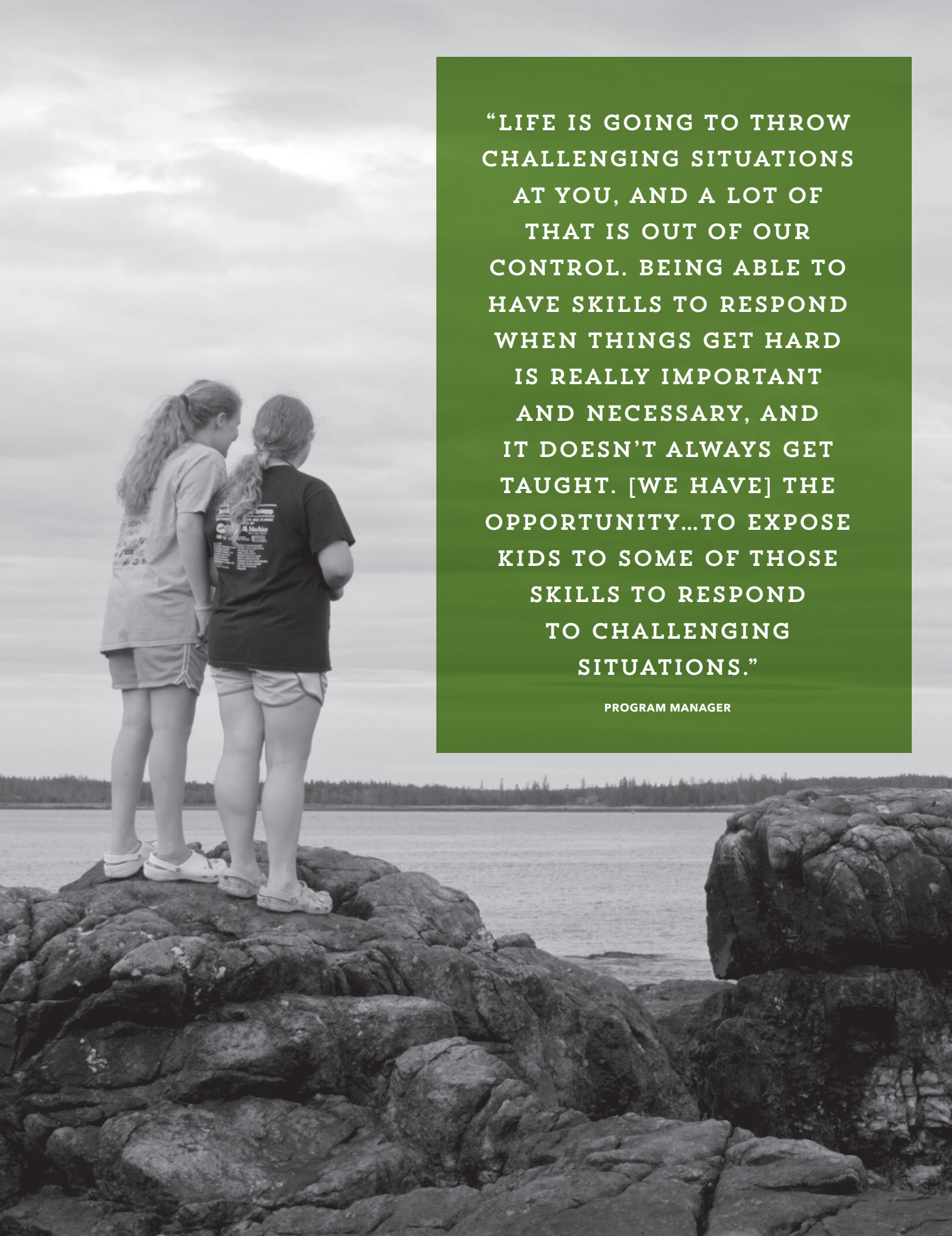


Percent of population 25 years of age and older with a bachelor's degree or higher

1 According to the Maine Resilience Building Network, Maine has the nation's highest rate for youth diagnosed with anxiety disorders and the third highest rate of youth with diagnosed depression. The 2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) reported that 59% of middle school students in Maine did not feel like they mattered to their community, a sentiment that tended to be greater in more rural counties.

2 See <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/>. While Maine is lower than other New England states, it is on par with the U.S. average (32%).

3 Some College, No Degree (2019) [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND\\_Report\\_2019.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND_Report_2019.pdf)



“LIFE IS GOING TO THROW CHALLENGING SITUATIONS AT YOU, AND A LOT OF THAT IS OUT OF OUR CONTROL. BEING ABLE TO HAVE SKILLS TO RESPOND WHEN THINGS GET HARD IS REALLY IMPORTANT AND NECESSARY, AND IT DOESN'T ALWAYS GET TAUGHT. [WE HAVE] THE OPPORTUNITY...TO EXPOSE KIDS TO SOME OF THOSE SKILLS TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGING SITUATIONS.”

PROGRAM MANAGER

**“MANY OF THE STUDENTS HAVE A MUCH LOWER TRUANCY RATE AT SCHOOL THIS YEAR. THEY SAID THEY WANT TO BE AT SCHOOL BECAUSE OF BEING IN THE PROGRAM. I HAVE SEEN THEM DOING BETTER ACADEMICALLY, AS THEY WANT TO HOLD TRUE TO THE ACADEMIC PLEDGE THEY CREATED.”**

**PROGRAM MANAGER**



# THE LERNER FOUNDATION AND ITS BIG BET ON A BOLD EXPERIMENT

The Emanuel and Pauline A. Lerner Foundation was established in memory of successful business owners and philanthropists who believed deeply in the importance of equal opportunity and social mobility. They loved Maine, and the Lerner Foundation has dedicated itself to furthering opportunities for people throughout the state.

After several years of traditional grantmaking to a variety of organizations in Maine, in 2015 the Foundation's board of directors chose to re-examine the Foundation's mission. In 2016, after a year of reflection, research, and planning, the board of directors decided to create a blueprint for raising and sustaining the aspirations of young people in rural Maine. The Lerner Foundation board members made a big bet, and - choosing to spend the Foundation out of existence - put all of the Foundation's assets behind one creative experiment that could move the needle and change the direction of young people's lives in Maine's small cities and rural areas.

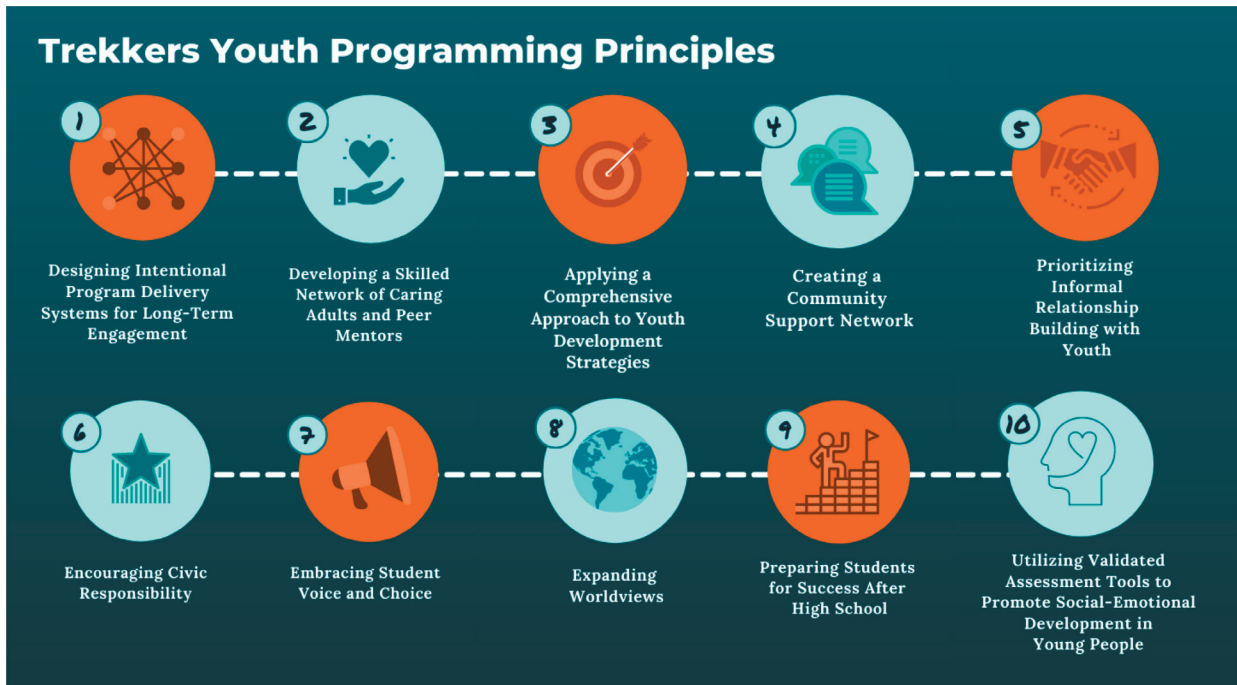
Following a year of additional research, design, and consultation, the Aspirations Incubator was launched in 2017. The idea for the Aspirations Incubator is based on the belief that students have a natural curiosity, a strong

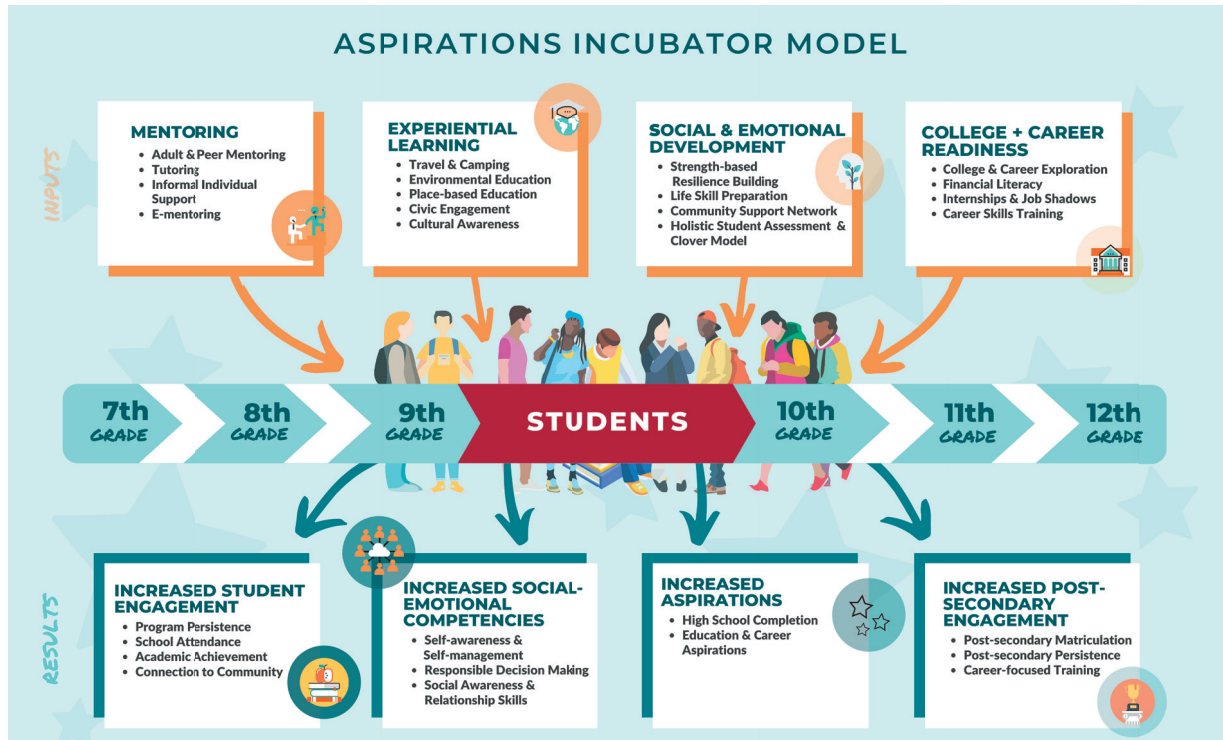
desire for connection, and inherent strengths that can be nurtured and developed at an early age. The Lerner Foundation believes that students, when supported by adult and peer mentors, can be inspired to pursue higher education, advanced training, and a wider range of career options by opening their minds and hearts to new ideas, experiences, and people.

The Aspirations Incubator pilot model is based on a set of Youth Programming Principles developed by Trekkers, a successful youth development organization in mid-coast Maine and former Lerner Foundation grantee. The Aspirations Incubator model design is relationship-based and features (1) extended connection with young people from 7th grade through high school, (2) adult and peer mentoring, (3) close collaboration with local schools, (4) experiential learning, travel, and outdoor adventure, and (5) ongoing assessment.

After a lengthy solicitation and vetting process, the Foundation carefully selected eight community-based youth organizations and school districts from across Maine to become its long-term partners.<sup>4</sup> (see Table 1). In designing the Aspirations Incubator, the Lerner

<sup>4</sup> Two of the original eight partners left the Aspirations Incubator pilot during the first two years.





Foundation eschewed the traditional relationship between grantors and grantees. The relationships among the Foundation and its partners are unusually collaborative. This partnering approach is reinforced by multiple channels of support from the Foundation which foster and sustain trust-based relationships with and among each of the grantee sites over the course of the six-year pilot.

As its contribution to this relationship-based approach, the Lerner Foundation provides both financial support and technical assistance to its partners. Each partner receives \$600,000 from the Foundation over the six years,

## TREKKERS: Youth Development in midcoast Maine

Trekkers is a youth mentoring organization in midcoast Maine that for over 25 years has connected young people with caring adults through travel, experiential learning and community service. Trekkers has developed an evidence-based set of Youth Programming Principles that is the basis for the Aspirations Incubator. Hundreds of Maine youth have participated in Trekkers programming, and they consistently report statistically significant positive change in indicators of resilience, reflection, empathy, trust, and optimism. In 2020, 100% of Trekkers youth in 12th grade graduated from high school. In addition to offering youth programs, in 2017 with funding from the Lerner Foundation, Trekkers opened the Trekkers Training Institute [www.trekkersinstitute.org](http://www.trekkersinstitute.org) to teach youth development practitioners about the Youth Programming Principles and help them reimagine their practice to reach better outcomes for young people.

**Table 1. Aspirations Incubator Pilot Partners**

Site	Program Name	School District
Chewonki	Waypoint	RSU #1
Apex Youth Connection	Trek2Connect	Biddeford School Department
Old Town-Orono YMCA	River Runners	RSU #34
The EdGE Program of Maine Seacoast Mission	Journey	SAD #37
The Game Loft	I Know ME	RSU #3
University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond	NorthStar	SAD #44



## WHAT IS THE PEAR INSTITUTE?

The PEAR Institute: Partnerships in Education and Resilience was founded in 1999 to promote innovation in education. The institute is based on a belief that high-quality programming can build youth social-emotional resiliency and contribute to school and life success.

Dr. Gil Noam, the Founder and Director of PEAR, has developed the Clover Model as a framework to help educators understand human developmental needs. It highlights four essential elements that people of all ages need in order to thrive, learn, and develop: Active Engagement, Assertiveness, Belonging, and Reflection. By identifying the basic needs that individual youth have in these areas, programs can be designed to intentionally meet those needs and nourish strengths.

The PEAR Institute has developed the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) to be used in combination with the Clover Model (see Appendix

E). The HSA provides a social-emotional “portrait” of the unique strengths and challenges of each young person that can be used to tailor programming.

The Aspiration Incubator relies on these tools to inform its work, particularly around providing a comprehensive approach to youth programming and using a validated assessment tool to gauge strengths and needs.



FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT THE PEAR INSTITUTE AT:  
[WWW.THEPEARINSTITUTE.ORG](http://WWW.THEPEARINSTITUTE.ORG)

intensive training from the Trekkers Training Institute, and ongoing coaching from Don Carpenter, the Lerner Foundation’s Senior Program Officer and the founding former executive director of Trekkers.

A commitment to continuous program adaptation and improvement is a key component of the grantee partners’ responsibility in the grantmaking relationship. The Foundation provides ongoing assessment support for the partner sites through the PEAR Institute (Partners in Education and Resilience). Program managers regularly administer PEAR’s Holistic Student Assessments to identify students’ strengths and challenges, and they use the data to adapt program implementation in response to students’ evolving needs.

Further, the Lerner Foundation realized from the outset that data-informed approaches were necessary for both the Foundation and its Aspirations Incubator partners. While the program managers regularly assess the participants, the Lerner Foundation contracted with the Data Innovation Project (DIP) at the University of Southern Maine’s Cutler Institute in 2017 to evaluate the Aspirations Incubator design model and participant outcomes during this six-year pilot period. This continuous independent program evaluation enables the Lerner Foundation to identify what is working and not working at each Aspirations Incubator site and to make adjustments to ensure the model’s long-term viability.

## INDEPENDENT EVALUATOR: Data Innovation Project

The Data Innovation Project (DIP), part of the Cutler Institute at the University of Southern Maine, was established in early 2016 to increase the public sector’s capacity to be data-informed by providing expert, accessible guidance and tools to build internal organizational capability to develop, sustain and use data to improve outcomes. Since its inception, DIP has worked with over 85 different nonprofits and foundations on a range of projects, from multi-site multi-year evaluations, to small data collection and analysis efforts, to evaluation capacity building and customized training.

DIP’S FULL EVALUATION REPORT COVERING YEARS 1 – 3  
OF THE ASPIRATIONS INCUBATOR IS AVAILABLE AT  
[WWW.ASPIRATIONSINCUBATOR.ORG](http://WWW.ASPIRATIONSINCUBATOR.ORG).

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The design of the Aspirations Incubator model is informed by a compelling body of research showing that supportive relationships with adults in caring environments can help students feel a sense of purpose and belonging, enhance their resiliency, and set them on a course to succeed in school and life.<sup>5</sup> Traditional youth development programs usually interact with their youth participants through programming grounded in one of three strategies – enrichment, prevention, or intervention. In contrast, the Aspirations Incubator model takes students beyond program walls, encourages interaction with the world around them, and employs multi-faceted engagement strategies – including enrichment, prevention, and intervention – as needed over the six-year program duration.

Each Aspirations Incubator partner commits to work

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5 Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24*(1), 6-36.

with consecutive annual cohorts 10-20 students for six continuous years during a critical period in their emotional and social development, providing the transformative power of strengths-based mentoring relationships that develop over that period of time. In his time at both Trekkers and the Aspiration Incubator, Don Carpenter has observed that “programs in and of themselves don’t change lives, but the relationships built within programs do. And what is so unique about [the Aspirations Incubator] is that not only does this program last for six years, it allows us to build these relationships from the start.” These vital non-familial relationships are associated with many positive outcomes, including increased likelihood of high school graduation, particularly for youth who have faced adverse life experiences.<sup>6</sup>

The Aspirations Incubator’s commitment to the participants in its program is fueled and sustained by the commitment shared among the Lerner Foundation and its partner sites. From the outset, the partner sites understood that the Foundation’s decision to commit all its resources to the six-year pilot represented a shift from a more transactional form of philanthropy to the development of a closer, trust-based relationship between the Foundation and its partners. This intentional shift ensures that the Foundation’s partners had the necessary resources to fully commit to a shared vision of a fundamentally different approach to youth development.

Working with Lerner Foundation staff and using the Aspiration Incubator model design, each partner designed a mentoring program suited to its own organization and community and includes a close partnership with one local school district. While each of the six pilot sites centers their Aspiration Incubator program on four areas of program practice – mentoring experiential learning, social and emotional development, and college and career readiness – each program reflects the unique characteristics of the Maine community it calls home.

### Nurturing Relationships and Aspirations Using Data-Informed Approaches


Aspirations Incubator program staff and mentors connect with students both within and outside of formal

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6 Sterrett, E. M., Jones, D. J., McKee, L. G. and Kincaid, C. Supportive Non-Parental Adults and Adolescent Psychosocial Functioning: Using Social Support as a Theoretical Framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 2011 Dec; 48*(0): 284–295.

## Partner Perspective

Patricia Estabrook is a co-founder of The Game Loft, a community-based youth development organization in Belfast that is the site for the Aspirations Incubator program I Know ME. She describes one student, a very energetic, “obstreperous” kid, who had a lot of difficulty in in groups of peers: “He worked us very hard in the first year of the program. He was really a handful. We spent a lot of time working with him individually to make sure he understood that he had our respect. We don’t kick out kids for having problem behaviors; we try to work with their strengths to overcome and give them greater strengths that they can rely on, so they no longer need those problem behaviors.”



**“RELATIONSHIPS ARE WHAT MOVE THE NEEDLE FOR KIDS; IT’S NOT THE ACTIVITY. THE ACTIVITY IS JUST THE VEHICLE TO BUILD THE RELATIONSHIPS, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND.”**

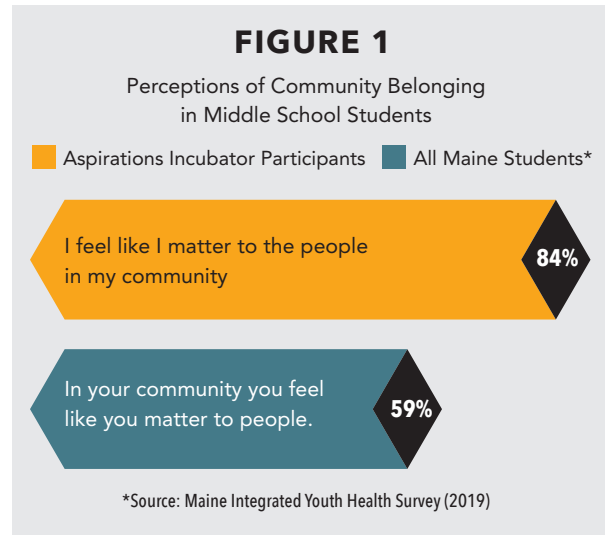
**SITE LEADERSHIP**

program activities.<sup>7</sup> Informal relationship building is a critical element of the program design and the personal relationships nurtured through these informal interactions are central to fostering a sense of belonging for young people, another measure where Aspirations Incubator participants rate higher than their peers across the state. (See Figure 1).

Don Carpenter stresses the importance of being able to develop personal connections over a six-year continuum. “In order to get young people turned on to learning, you first have to turn them on to life. That takes a while sometimes. It’s not a linear path. Human development is a process. The beauty of the Aspirations Incubator approach is that you have six years to grow a relationship – six years to name, know, and nourish a young person’s spark, and six years to know where and when you can promote growth.”

While personal relationships are foundational to

<sup>7</sup> Careful screening and training of mentors allow the programs to safely promote supportive connections outside of core programming.



the Aspirations Incubator, data is also a living element of the program model. From the moment a student signs up to participate in an Aspirations Incubator partner program in 7th grade through their high school graduation, their social and emotional strengths and challenges are regularly assessed using PEAR’s Holistic Student Assessments. The data from these assessments supports the Aspirations Incubator’s highly individualized and relationship-based approach. Combined with close observation, the different data points guide staff in putting together strengths-based strategies to address areas in which a program participant faces challenges, meeting students where they are developmentally, and building activities around their core strengths to foster greater balance and confidence.

### Finding their voice, building community

Each of the six pilot sites is as unique as the Maine community in which it is located. Common elements, however, include experiential learning and leadership development; trips of varying lengths, from local day trips to week-long expeditions; community engagement and service; cultural and educational activities; and career exploration. Students participate in choosing where they want to go and what they want to do. This process gives them an opportunity to develop executive functioning and express preferences in ways that may not be acknowledged or allowed in other aspects of their lives. Through group decision-making, students also develop skills to work in community, build agency, and look out for one another.

In addition to scheduled programming, ample time is built into Aspirations Incubator programs for informal interactions of all kinds. Young people and mentors

## Partner Perspective

It is a chilly spring day in Western Maine and Lyndsey Smith is tinkering with her motorcycle in her driveway. With Lyndsey is one of her students who is having a hard week. As Program Director of NorthStar, an Aspirations Incubator site in Bethel hosted by the University of Maine 4-H Center at Bryant Pond, Smith frequently finds herself interacting with students in the midst of her daily life. While weeding her garden, cooking a meal, or night skiing on a nearby mountain, she and her students are building the kinds of relationships that can change the course of kids’ lives. “I offer this totally non-judgmental lens,” Smith says. “At the end of the day, my job is to be there. When you have your worst day ever, you can call me.”



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OUT WITH  
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HAVE BEFORE.”

STUDENT

connect in myriad small, but important ways that offer vital support and foster resiliency.

### **Bridging program, home and school**

None of the participants could have anticipated how these relationships would be tested - as well as reinforced - during the COVID-19 pandemic, which began during the third year of the pilot. While many organizations struggled to stay connected with young people who could no longer attend in-person programming, the Aspirations Incubator programs maintained contact with participants through the relationships and communications channels developed pre-pandemic,

and quickly adapted program designs to a virtual format.

It became clear that while Aspirations Incubator programming has proven effective in developing resiliency in young people, the Aspirations Incubator approach is also a resilient model for staying connected with young people during a period of intense disruption in their lives. One of the signs of this resiliency is that the connections the program fosters extended beyond the students themselves to include families and local school communities.

This bridging across program, home, and school happened in a variety of different ways at each of the Aspirations Incubator program sites over the past year.

Outreach to families involved deliveries of food and supplies, help with transportation, connections with outside resources, or just talking on the front porch.<sup>8</sup>

At each site, program managers report that relationships have grown stronger during the pandemic, as mentors have continued to support students and families, many of whom have experienced significant life challenges during the past year. Teachers and school principals also turned to program managers for help reaching out to vulnerable youth to encourage engagement with school during extended periods of remote learning.

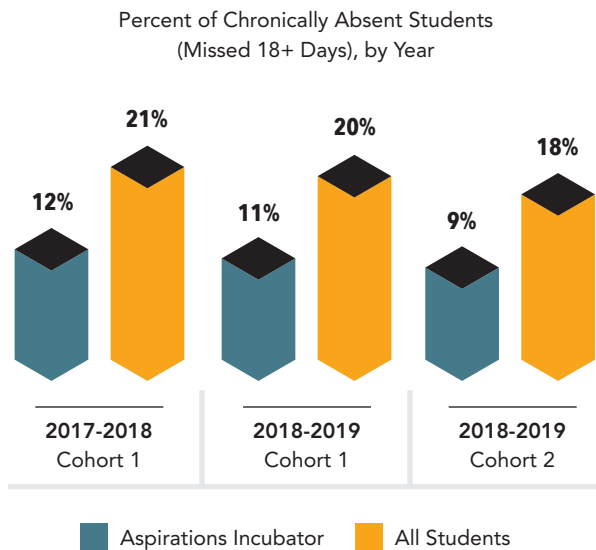
The adaptive, wraparound support inherent in the Aspirations Incubator program model does not leave anyone to face a challenge alone. Everyone—students, parents, teachers, mentors, school leaders, and other community youth advocates—is a valued part of the team.

## PROMISING INTERIM RESULTS

The Lerner Foundation is pleased to share highlights from DIP’s evaluation of the first three years of the Aspirations Incubator pilot, covering the period from September 2017 to August 2020. The evaluation report from DIP shows promising evidence that the Aspirations Incubator

<sup>8</sup> Federal and state CDC guidelines and organizational protocols were followed when engaging youth, their parents, or other community members in person during the pandemic.

**FIGURE 2**



# KEY DATA POINTS YEARS 1-3

## 93%

REPORT THAT THE PROGRAM HELPS THEM FEEL CONNECTED TO THEIR COMMUNITY

## 70%

REPORT POSITIVE GROWTH ON MEASURES RELATED TO LEARNING AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

ASPIRATIONS INCUBATOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS ARE HALF AS LIKELY TO BE CHRONICALLY ABSENT THAN GRADE LEVEL PEERS.

## 70%

REPORT POSITIVE GROWTH ON AT LEAST FOUR MEASURES OF RESILIENCY

## 95%

REPORTED THAT THE PROGRAM HELPED THEM TO EXPERIENCE NEW PLACES

AND 98% SAID THE PROGRAM HELPED THEM ACCEPT PEOPLE WHO ARE DIFFERENT FROM THEM

## 99%

OF 8TH GRADERS BELIEVE THEY WILL FINISH HIGH SCHOOL, AND 88% BELIEVE THEY WILL PURSUE A POST-SECONDARY DEGREE.

is helping young people feel more connected to their community, more open to new experiences and people, more engaged in school and more confident about high school graduation and post-secondary education.

Each partner site has on-boarded three cohorts of students and has implemented programming for participants in 7th, 8th, and 9th grades. The cohorts are fairly evenly split between male and female participants, with some site variations. The majority of students identify as White (80%), followed by students that identify as more than one race (14%).

After three full years of programming with more than 250 students from Maine’s rural communities, the data show many positive outcomes for Aspirations Incubator participants:

Another compelling positive results of the pilot thus far: **Aspirations Incubator students in cohorts 1 & 2 were half as likely to be chronically absent (missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their grade-level peers.** (See Figure 2). A measurable effect on chronic absenteeism is important because it is linked to a cascade of negative outcomes, including dropping out of school, and experiencing poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system later in life.<sup>9</sup>

There are additional promising interim results from the

Aspirations Incubator. Across all cohorts and sites, participants begin their journey in the program with both strengths and areas of challenge. After participating in the program, students report notable improvement in each of four target areas: relationships; resiliency and social-emotional skills; exposure to diversity; and, school engagement and aspirations.

### Relationships

A majority of students reported improvements in peer and adult relationships each year. 93% agreed that the program had helped them to feel connected to their community. 84% said they feel like they matter and they have people to talk with when they feel lonely.

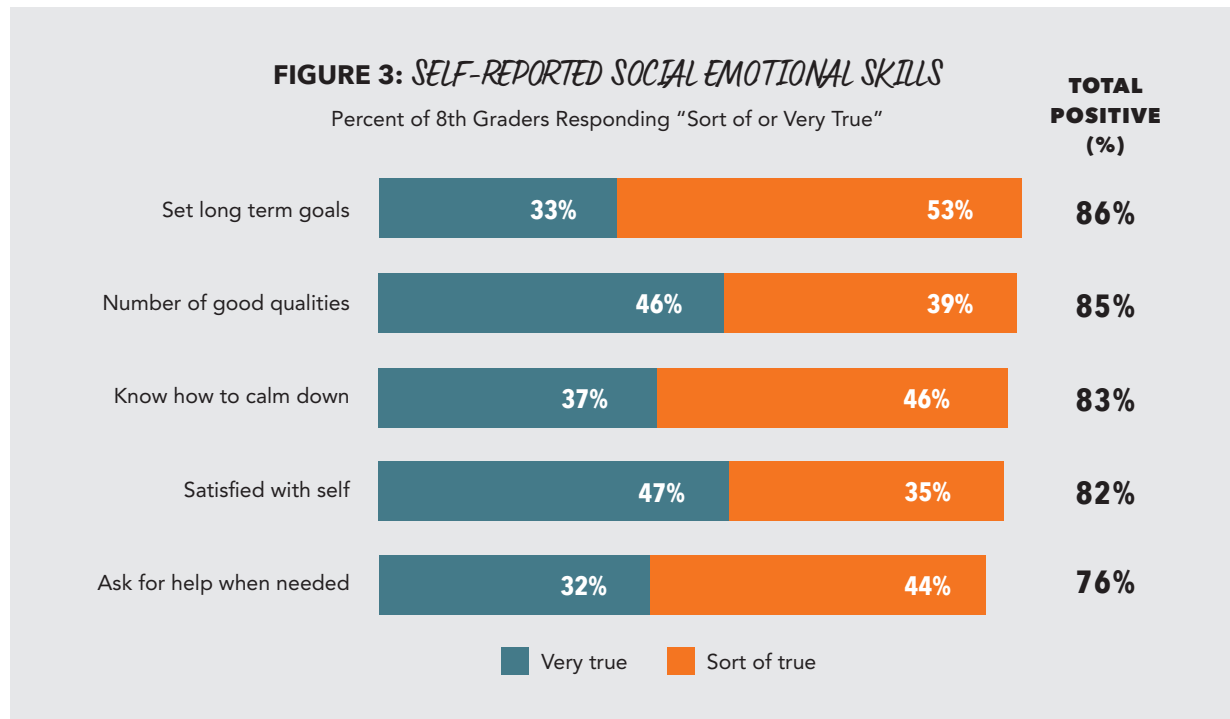
### Resiliency and Social-Emotional Skills

At least 70% of students consistently reported positive growth on four or more measures of resiliency. A majority of 8th graders reported that the program helped them learn to express their needs, make concrete plans, stay level headed, talk to others, and understand their own strengths.

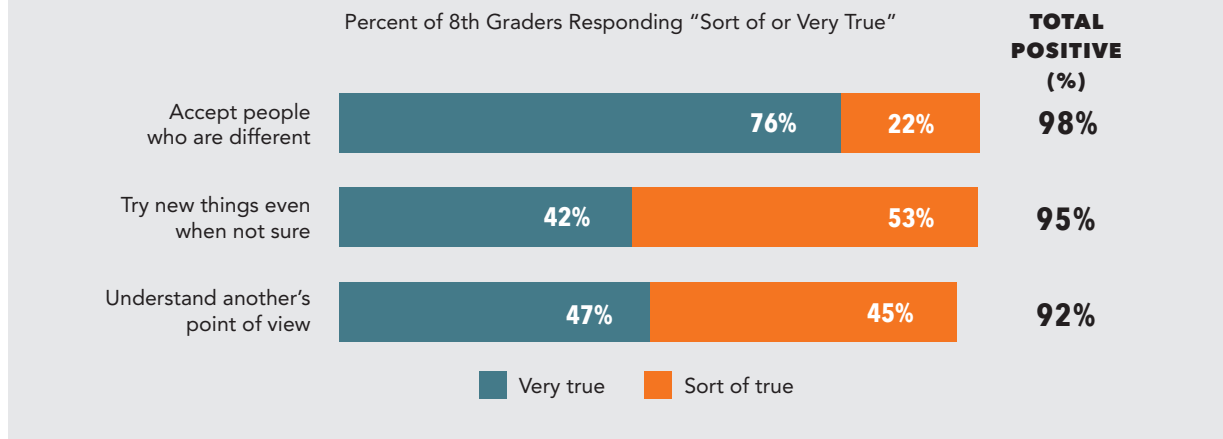
### Exposure to Diversity

Almost all 8th graders reported that the program helped them to experience new places (95%) and said that they accept people who are different (98%). Most also said

<sup>9</sup> Ginsburg, Alan, Phyllis Jordan and Hedy Chang (2014). Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success. Attendance Works. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/absences-add-up/>



**FIGURE 4: SELF-REPORTED ACCEPTANCE OF DIVERSITY**



## Partner Perspective

Many of Briana West’s students had never left Downeast Maine before participating in Journey, the Aspirations Incubator site West manages under the lead of Maine Seacoast Mission in Cherryfield. The night before one of the 8th grade cohort’s core trips—a five-day camping expedition to Marshall Island, a few miles off the coast—a young woman texts West to say she isn’t coming. She’s terrified, she finally admits. It’s natural to feel anxious when you’re trying something new, West notes reassuringly, while also reminding her that she signed on for trips like this when she joined Journey. The student eventually agrees to come in spite of her fears. The group anchors near the island in a small boat, and proceeds to transport all the students and their gear to shore in a small skiff—just the beginning of a week of adapting to circumstances, some expected, some not; some fun, some not so fun. By the end of five days, the young woman reports that she has had an amazing time.

they try new things even when they are not sure about them, and that they try to understand another person’s point of view. (See Figure 4).

### Learning, School Engagement, and Aspirations


More than 70% of students consistently reported experiencing positive growth on measures related to learning and school engagement. As noted earlier, students were half as likely to be chronically absent (missing 18 or more days of school in a year) compared with their grade level peers. Among 8th graders, 99% said that they would finish high school, and 88% said they would pursue post-secondary education. 100% said they would have a career.

Why are these results important? To date, the findings suggest that the Aspirations Incubator may be helping students develop traits like perseverance and confidence that they can carry into adulthood - traits that they can draw on when responding to life’s inevitable difficulties and challenges.

Aspirations Incubator programming also puts students into situations where they have to work together with other students whom they may not know well, or who may be different from them - experiences that are important preparation for life after high school, whether that is going to college, serving in the military, or participating in a community.

It is evident from DIP’s mid-point assessment that the Aspirations Incubator is developing students’ capacity to be more engaged in school, more supported by peers and caring adults, and more resilient. Such outcomes have the potential to positively influence students’ life trajectories, with lasting benefits to them as individuals, the communities in which they live, and society as a whole.





**“IT HAS DEFINITELY HELPED ME EXPERIENCE THINGS I WOULDN’T NORMALLY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DO BEFORE I JOINED THE PROGRAM. IT HAS HELPED ME GET TO KNOW DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND GET OUT OF MY SHELL.”**

**STUDENT**

## **THE FUTURE - SHARING WHAT WORKS**

The Lerner Foundation’s “big bet” on the Aspirations Incubator aims to discern and to demonstrate what works to nurture and sustain aspirations for young people in rural communities. The interim evaluation results for the pilot initiative offer insights that we believe will move us closer to answering this question.

Measurable benefits for participants – particularly in the areas of relationships, resiliency, exposure to new ideas and experiences, and academic engagement – preliminarily suggest that the Aspirations Incubator model holds real promise as a blueprint for other youth development programs in Maine and around the nation.

As the phase of this initiative supported by the Lerner Foundation progresses toward its conclusion in 2023, the Foundation and its six partner sites will continue to strengthen program design and implementation to prepare for a wider embrace of the Aspirations Incubator

model in Maine and beyond.

Program staff will focus on ongoing engagement of new cohorts of students as well as retention of existing participants. Other areas of continuing effort and refinement will include recruitment and retention of adult and peer mentors and development of more robust community connections.

The interim results shared in the DIP evaluation report were impacted significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in March 2020. Nonetheless, most Aspirations Incubator students and their families were able to maintain supportive connections with adult mentors throughout the pandemic, thanks to a program model that supports both structured and informal relationship building.

Over the next few years, as students return to in-person school, the Lerner Foundation will be taking



**“IT HAS MADE ME GET OUT OF MY  
COMFORT ZONE, TALK TO NEW PEOPLE, GO  
TO NEW PLACES, AND LEARN ABOUT MYSELF  
AND WHERE I’M FROM”**

**STUDENT**

particular care to assess program data to see what effect the Aspirations Incubator has on resiliency measures going forward. The Foundation expects that the same program model elements that have helped the Aspirations Incubator programs through the pandemic will contribute to positive participant outcomes in coming years as well, which will be further evidence that this is a model worth investing in for the long haul.

Even with the disruptions of an unprecedented global health crisis, the Lerner Foundation believes the interim results of the Aspirations Incubator evaluation are compelling, and the board of directors remains fully committed to the goal of creating a model that ensures that all rural students benefit from experiences and supportive mentoring relationships that can set them on a path to success and fulfillment as productive and contributing members of thriving communities.

At this mid-point in our ongoing “big bet”, the board of directors of the Lerner Foundation is grateful to our partner programs, their staff and ours, and, most important, to the students, parents and volunteer mentors for their dedication to this bold experiment to create a promising new path forward for rural Maine youth.

As we look ahead to the remaining years of the Aspirations Incubator pilot initiative, we will continue to be guided by our quest to identify the conditions necessary to successfully launch and maintain a long-term, aspirations-building model that can change lives for young people in rural communities. We will be sharing our findings and reflections on the Aspirations Incubator website ([aspirationsincubator.org](http://aspirationsincubator.org)), and we invite you to follow along as this exciting endeavor continues to move forward.

# Additional Resources

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



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