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## Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Programs in Maine High Schools

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**Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Programs  
in Maine High Schools**

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June 2021

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# Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Programs in Maine High Schools

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## Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Programs in Maine High Schools

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### Executive Summary

In recent years, extended learning opportunities (ELOs) have gained traction in Maine and nationally as a means for students to develop “college, career, and life” skills through out-of-classroom experiences. As ELOs are not structured or regulated by the state, they vary significantly in range, scope, and access. This report offers insight into wide-ranging ELO work happening in schools across Maine, as well as in-depth profiles of two exemplary ELO sites.

Over the course of several months, MEPRI researchers analyzed documents and conducted interviews with key stakeholders and district staff involved in this work throughout Maine. Our study yielded several findings with implications for policy and program development that will be of interest to legislators, policymakers, educators, students, employers, and more. Broadly, we found that ELOs serve a highly diverse range of needs and purposes, expanding opportunities for students to develop essential life skills through out-of-classroom experiences. Even within a single school, ELOs differ according to student need and interest, local partner capacity, and school policy. Some ELO experiences are structured and consistent across groups of students - such as semester- or year-long internships with local employers; others are specifically tailored to individuals, such as independent research studies focused on a student’s career interest. While these opportunities *may* be aimed at career development (through occupational education or industry-specific training), ELOs can enrich student learning in many ways by expanding the educational pathways available to all students. They can offer students nontraditional options for credit recovery, college preparation through dual enrollment, and, most importantly, opportunities to develop life skills not directly taught in the classroom. This tailored approach has broad implications for equity, as it opens new opportunities for students who might not find school success via traditional educational avenues. School staff are overwhelmingly supportive of ELOs - and tout their success - in places where they operate.

While this report reveals important information about the nature of ELO work in Maine, many questions remain. According to our findings, ELOs are most successful in schools that have a dedicated coordinator with a diverse skill set; the majority of Maine schools do not currently support such a position. Further, there are no universal assessment or evaluation tools in place to support anecdotal claims about the positive impacts of ELOs. Given the grassroots nature of ELO work, there are also questions about labor practices and the protection of students and community partners that are

unanswered. In the coming years, and as ELOs expand to more and more schools, stakeholders will need to work together to answer these questions and more.

## **Background & Context**

As part of its annual workplan for the state legislature, MEPRI conducted a study on the scope and practice of career readiness activities, and specifically extended learning opportunities (ELOs), in Maine schools. This study seeks to answer and expand on the following questions: How do districts define and assess career readiness? What are the characteristics of programs from job shadows to internships and programs that result in credentials of value? How do ELOs help to prepare students? These questions emerge as ELOs and other nontraditional academic experiences are gaining greater traction and visibility in Maine and beyond. Mapping the ELO landscape is a critical first step in improving the delivery of, access to, and impacts of ELOs for Maine's students. Our methods for investigating ELOs include a deep study of two school-based ELO programs in addition to a broader study of ELO practices statewide. In this report, we describe our research methods, important findings, and discuss important policy implications for ELOs and the stakeholders who develop and support them.

It is important to note at the outset that while our initial investigation centered on the *career readiness* aspect of ELOs, it quickly became clear that ELOs (by design and in practice) provide a much more expansive set of opportunities and skills beyond those that prepare students for the workforce. Further, our research revealed that career readiness cannot easily be separated from college or life readiness. Career readiness in particular is one strand of the development of life skills, and while schools may offer specific activities that focus on careers or on workplace skills (e.g. mock interviews, job shadows, or industry mentorships), our study found that ELOs in practice encompass a much more diverse range of experiences. In other words, career development is best viewed as one potential outcome of ELO participation, rather than the key motivator. This understanding of the relationship between ELOs and career readiness shaped our investigative focus and pushed us to study ELO programs more broadly.

## **Workforce Development in Maine**

Starting in late 2014, Maine State Workforce Development board commenced a stakeholder engagement process to assess challenges and find ways to better serve Maine residents and employers. Several programs created by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (including adult, youth, and dislocated workers; Wagner-Peyser; and Basic Education, among others) were involved, along with a coalition of employers, employees, and state residents. This group created a working plan, the 2016-2020 Unified Plan, centered on the notion that the success of Maine's economy will be

“determined by the...quality of its workforce and the ability of employers to fill their needs for skilled labor.” The plan’s desired results include increased access to education for Maine residents, and productive, career-ready, skilled workers. The plan was to achieve these results through (among other things) increased integration of state provided post-secondary training within the secondary education system; increased use of internships and apprenticeships to mitigate skill gaps; statewide systems of credentialing; measurement of program participant employment outcomes; and the development of a Career Pathways System to align efforts of education and training with occupational needs.

While much of the Unified Plan was implemented to meet federal criteria established under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) (H.R. 803, 2021), Maine’s plan addresses particularly pressing local needs. Maine has, famously, the oldest population of any state and an unemployment rate significantly and historically lower than the national rate (U.S. DOL Statistics, 2021). If Maine employers are to compete on the regional, national, and international level, these factors make a compelling case for Maine local and state governments to invest in youth development. Absent a concentrated effort on the postgraduate preparation of Maine’s high school students, this need will persist.

### **Life and Career Ready Standards**

An additional source of support and motivation for ELO development includes the Maine Life and Career Ready Standards, the subset of Maine Learning Results focused on career and education development. The Life and Career Ready Standards were most recently revised in 2018-19 and officially adopted in March 2020. These standards present a broad vision of student achievement and life beyond high school. According to the Maine Department of Education, the standards “place social emotional learning and critical and creative thinking on par with academic skills and career development skills because there are skills in each of these areas that students will need no matter what they choose to do after high school.”<sup>1</sup> Maine schools and districts have wide latitude in how they implement standards, and are charged with a common goal of providing students life skills and experiences they will need to adapt to changing economic conditions, along multiple pathways. The standards call for schools to “creatively offer relevant opportunities that include interactive experiences and allow for direct exposure between students and a variety of career options” and call for considerable collaboration with community partners (i.e. employers) to bridge the gap between education and career development.

Extended learning opportunities, in many ways, are one operationalization of Maine’s Life and Career Readiness standards. While a broad description of the standard suggests opportunities including internships, job-shadow, dual enrollment

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/content/career/standards>



(early college courses), service learning and volunteer opportunities, guest speakers and field trips, the standards themselves dictate a rigorous set of assessment criteria across three domains – self-knowledge and life skills; aspirations; and building pathways for the future. Thoughtfully designed and rigorously implemented ELOs are well suited to address all three domains and will expand opportunities beyond those suggested by the standard.

### **What are Extended Learning Opportunities?**

There is not a significant body of literature related to ELOs. One reason for this is the lack of a consistent definition or conception. Considerable research can be found for many of the components of ELOs (such as internships or job shadows), but as a coherent, defined concept, original research is sparse. Much of the extant literature takes the form of meta-analysis or studies of these various components. Even within one school, an ELO can serve career development, academic, or enrichment purposes. Given the sparse body of literature, along with the wide-ranging nature of ELO programs we investigated in Maine, this review addresses the breadth and scope of such programs.

One of the most significant, and earliest relevant reports was commissioned by the Council of Chief State School Officers. Princiotta and Fortune (2009) undertook to study the benefits of “safe structured learning environments for student outside the traditional school day”, and included opportunities such as tutoring, volunteering, homework support, and art and music programs in settings such as Boys & Girls Clubs, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Centers, and schools. These activities could be more accurately seen as meeting the description of Extended Learning Time (ELT), a phrase often used interchangeably with ELO. Princiotta and Fortune found that high quality ELO programs (defined as those programs that recruit and train quality staff; set focused, challenging goals; implement frequent evaluation; and provide an array of content rich programming) were closely linked to improved academic achievement, attendance, student engagement and social-emotional achievement. Princiotta and Fortune also identified several key components to a successful ELO program – establishment of a stakeholder group at the state level to envision, develop and administer ELOs; identify consistent funding sources; specify goals and set standards; evaluate against those goals and standards; provide incentives to improve; and support the development of a strong workforce.

A 2016 MEPRI study (Biddle & Mette, n.d.) reviewed existing literature to investigate the successful strategies used in ELT programs, defined as those offered “outside the regularly scheduled school day during the school year”. Despite using the terms ELO and ELT interchangeably, the focus of the study was firmly on the “after school” type programs, alternatively referred to as OST (Out of School Time) or enrichment programs. Similarly to Princiotta and Fortune, Biddle and Mette found ELT

programs improved academic achievement, and further pointed to some potential mechanisms (pathways), namely a reduction in risky after school behaviors, diminished crime, and increased physical health, all linked to reduced high school dropout rates. They identified four hallmarks of a successful ELT program. Programs or enrichment opportunities that were sequenced, active, focused, and explicit in their goals (SAFE) were shown to be most effective in improving outcomes. At the time, the authors identified funding and incentives, and barriers for rural students accessing high quality ELTs as significant issues requiring additional action within Maine. Despite these two important studies defining ELOs/ELTs in a significantly different way to the definition in use in 2021, the factors driving the success (or factors whose absence predicts poor outcomes) are remarkably similar to the factors associated with successful ELO programs who use present day definition of ELOs.

The most relevant study of ELOs to the current conversation was that conducted by the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation in New Hampshire in 2016 (Callahan et al., n.d.). The authors spent two years investigating the impact of ELO participation on student outcomes in a state that had shifted to a state-wide model of credit bearing ELOs some 5 years previously (SY 08/09). Using a robust definition of extended learning as the “acquisition of knowledge and skills through instruction or study outside of the traditional classroom methodology, including, but not limited, to apprenticeships, community service, independent study, online courses, internships, performing groups and private instruction.” The authors investigated two main questions: 1) What are the impacts of ELO participation on short- and long-term student outcomes? and 2) How does quality of implementation at the school level impact student participation in ELOs? They found that students who participated in ELOs were more likely to have accumulated credits and be on track to graduate on time than non-participating peers, were more likely to take the PSAT and SAT exams, outperformed non-participating peers on the SAT, and were significantly more likely to be enrolled in college six months post-graduation. The quality or fidelity of implementation at the school level was the strongest predictor of student participation in ELOs. Researchers found that the presence of a dedicated ELO coordinator was both the predictor, and cause, of a quality implementation at the school level. Presence of dedicated funding for an ELO coordinator position was shown to predict a more diverse range of ELO paths and students, greater percentage of faculty involvement and input into ELOs, funding to support student participation in ELOs beyond staff salary (e.g., stipends to cover materials and transportation), and greater levels of surrounding community involvement in school ELO programs. The presence of a dedicated ELO coordinator position was also positively correlated with a rigorous assessment of student participation with in-person ELO offerings, which in turn correlated positively with multiple academic outcomes. Participation with so-called “virtual” ELO offerings did not demonstrate a similar correlation.

A dissertation study by Crawford (2018) looked at student perceptions of ELO programs in a New Hampshire school district. Crawford found students strongly valued the ELO experience, and that ELOs were a manifestation of the mission and values of their school. Additional findings suggest ELO program provided individualized learning plans, facilitated learning aligned to individual student interest, and fostered stronger connections between students and local communities.

### **Parallel State and Districtwide Programs**

The mandate from Maine to equip graduates with the skills to succeed in career, college, and life (via readiness standards) has resulted in the creation or expansion of multiple Out-of-School-Time (OST) programs at both the state and district levels (Mette, Biddle, & Fairman, 2016). While individual district ELOs may have similar goals and deliver similar outcomes, these 3<sup>rd</sup> party programs are able to devote considerable resources and achieve significant progress towards student and district goals.

Several programs have demonstrated longevity and efficacy in this area. In addition to the traditional CTE (Career and Technical Education) regional centers and schools, Maine's "Jobs for Maine Graduates" (JMG) program partners with middle and high schools, and employers, across the state to provide students with opportunities to develop skills desired by potential employers. JMG works in all 16 counties in Maine and is supported by more than 100 Maine employers, foundations, and donors, and the organization is a powerful public/private partnership that has been working for nearly two decades to offer Maine students opportunities both inside and outside the schoolhouse walls. JMG managers perform a range of skill-building services, including school-based courses focusing on career readiness and various opportunities working with official partner employers.

On a more local level, programs like the Portland Public Schools (PPS) "Make It Happen"<sup>2</sup> aim to develop postgraduate opportunities by providing individual mentoring by local employers and scholarships from higher education institutions to multilingual and immigrant students. The Make it Happen program encourages students to build "competitive academic profiles for college admissions and financial aid". A blend of traditional school counseling and out-of-school opportunities, programs like Make It Happen help create individual, and multiple, pathways to high-school success, and often serve a specific population.

Specific to ELOs, there is a relatively new organization in Maine called the Community Coordinators Collective (C3).<sup>3</sup> C3 is a grassroots community of practice begun in 2018 and comprised of educators from several districts around the state interested in providing students with career exploration opportunities; members are ELO-focused school professionals whose job titles and responsibilities vary. These

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<sup>2</sup> [https://mlc.portlandschools.org/programs/make\\_it\\_happen](https://mlc.portlandschools.org/programs/make_it_happen)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mainec3.com/who-we-are>

educators recognize that a critical component of career and college readiness is providing a wide range of out-of-school options, including internships, job shadows, field trips and career fairs. C3 members have uniquely tailored programs at their respective schools, and represent the diversity of approaches to ELO adoption in Maine's K-12 schools. As a group, they gather to share and distribute resources, advocate for statewide ELO support, and connect with others doing similar work.

Correctly implemented and fully supported ELO programs, like those described herein, blend the individual pathway with the deep community connection that optimize student benefit and meet local needs in a meaningful way.

## **Defining ELOs**

For the purposes of this report, it is necessary to establish a working definition of ELOs; it will become apparent, however, that such a definition is not shared among all stakeholders. Prior work (Biddle & Mette, n.d.) has not made a distinction between Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) and Extended Learning Time (ELT). However, the authors feel there is an important difference. ELT implies activities that occur outside of the regular school calendar, both daily and monthly. ELT programs as previously reported include after-school enrichment activities and vacation/summer activities. ELO work is not defined by the temporal frame in which it occurs, but instead those opportunities that do not necessarily occur within the prescribed curriculum.

Our conversations with stakeholders and review of school materials suggest that already-existing ELO opportunities are widely varied, both in scope and industry. It is clear that students have been able to engage in a broad range of opportunities curated to align closely with their personal and career interests. Formal ELO-designated internships at one school alone encompassed 14 different NCAIS coded industries over the last two years: agriculture, construction, manufacturing, retail, transportation, information technology, finance/insurance, real estate, professional services, educational services, health care, arts/entertainment/recreation, accommodation, and civic/social organizations. The employers participating in these opportunities include such diverse organizations as Amjambo Africa Newspaper, Planned Parenthood, and SMRT Architects/Engineers.

## **Methods**

### **Comparative case study**

To create a substantive picture of the scope and implementation of ELOs in Maine, we adopted a comparative case study approach (Yin, 1994). Comparative case studies allow for deep analysis of site-specific phenomena as well as the ability to generalize about those phenomena on a broader level. Maine's geographic, political, and educational diversity necessitates adopting a wide lens on policy issues. Given the

difficulty of gathering such information from all districts (or a representative sample of districts), and given our desire to understand ELOs more deeply, this approach allowed us to explore the phenomena at multiple levels. We selected two high school ELO programs to focus on; these sites were chosen for the robustness of their ELO programs, in addition to the stark differences between them. We describe these sites in more detail below. To supplement this site-specific analysis, we also examined ELO work being done in various locations across Maine. This analysis was conducted through an examination of a small sample of district websites, a study of the Community Coordinators Collaborative (C3), and a review of several organizations doing career readiness work in Maine.

### **Data collection**

Our primary data collection methods include document review and interviews or focus groups with key informants. Relevant documents were either gathered from public sources or provided to researchers by site staff members. Key informants were identified through a series of conversations with knowledgeable stakeholders, and the list of interviewees was refined as we learned more about each site.

Interviews with key staff members and a focus group with a group of self-selected C3 members provide the bulk of our data for analysis. After identifying an initial list of potential interviewees - including individuals serving as ELO coordinators, school- and district-level administrators, and other school staff - we invited them to participate in the project. All participants reviewed the project details and signed informed consent forms prior to their interviews. All interviews were conducted via Zoom by one or two MEPRI researchers between December 2020 and February 2021. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, for a total of approximately 10 hours of interview data; the focus group included C3 members representing four schools and lasted 90 minutes. Topics covered in interviews and the focus group included the mechanisms and logistics of ELO practice, the goals and purposes of ELOs, student experiences, community relationships, and program challenges and successes.

We collected a total of 23 documents specifically relevant to ELO work at our two case study sites (note: this does not include the documents we reviewed as part of our background research or materials we reviewed to flesh out the statewide context). These documents fell into one of two categories: 1) functional documents that facilitate ELO activity (i.e. student worksheets, internship applications, and evaluation templates), and 2) “visioning” documents that project a vision of what ELO work ought to be/do (i.e. programs of study, job descriptions, and ELO-specific websites). Together, these two types of documents serve as helpful supplements to interview data in constructing a comprehensive view of ELOs in Maine’s schools.

## Data analysis

Two MEPRI researchers developed an initial set of *a priori* codes for analysis, based on a review of the relevant literature and local contextual knowledge. These initial codes included broad general themes, such as *role of staffing*, *student outcomes*, and *community partnerships*. We also allowed space for more emergent themes and discoveries in the data, resulting in a robust and complex codebook to guide our analysis.

Once an initial coding scheme was in place, we established reliability between our two coders. Each coder analyzed two identical interview transcripts, resulting in an overlap of more than 70%, indicating sufficient intercoder reliability. Based on this reliability analysis, we made minor revisions to the coding scheme (clarifying descriptions, merging two similar codes, and adding three new codes for key elements that were not sufficiently captured by the initial codebook). The resulting coding scheme was then applied to all transcripts and documents.

We began with a case analysis method (Patton, 1990) to analyze interviews, generating short descriptive profiles of each interview to summarize dominant and concurrent themes. Visioning documents were coded and profiled similarly to interview transcripts. Functional documents were coded as a whole, meaning that codes were applied to the entire document rather than to excerpts, as these types of documents were typically implicit, rather than explicit, expressions of various perspectives and themes. Compiling interview profiles with coded documents within case study sites allowed us to develop a comprehensive perspective on ELOs in that particular site. We then adopted a cross-case analytic approach using a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1985) - identifying and comparing incidents within each coding category, learning how these categories interact with one another, and then generating an understanding of ELOs as reflected in our data.

## Limitations

The conclusions we are able to draw from this study are specific to Maine's particular ELO context, and reflect the work and experience of two specific ELO programs. Given the ubiquity of various recurring themes identified in our analysis, we believe there are important lessons to be learned from the ELO work being done in Maine's schools. However, our study has some practical and methodological limitations that prevent us from making stronger claims about the scope and impact of ELOs in Maine. While we attempted to interview a wide sample of school staff, time, resources, and participant availability required us to limit our data collection to a small set of key informants; those left out might reflect varying perspectives on ELOs that we did not capture. Further, limiting our analysis to two case sites necessarily narrowed our analytic focus by allowing a deeper window into how ELO work happens on the ground. This means that the full range of ELO work across all of Maine's schools is not captured

in this study; to address this limitation, we have included the perspectives of members of the statewide ELO coordinator collaborative (C3).

## **Findings:**

### **Case Study Site Profiles: District A, Site A**

District A is a predominantly rural school district in York County, Maine, consisting of 7 combined elementary, middle, and high schools. The district draws students from six towns and encompasses a broad swath of south-west Maine. Site A is the single high school in the district. US Census data indicates that the student body of District A is approximately 95% white, with a median household income of approximately \$70,000, 36% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (FRL). The district had approximately 3,000 students enrolled in SY17/18, with a total district budget of approx \$45,000,000.

The ELO program in this district began in about 2016, after a senior administrator attended a regional conference on multiple pathways and ELO models in other states. Recognizing the potential benefits for their own district, the administrator presented the ideas to district leadership and secured approval for the position from administration and the school board. District leadership recognized that the role of ELO coordinator requires a unique skill set and personality, and the job description for this position was written accordingly.

In this district, the ELO coordinator sits at the district's only high school, working primarily with grades 9-12 and in close collaboration with the building principal. However, the coordinator also works closely with the curriculum director and the school faculty to define ELO offerings and ensure they are aligned with district standards. The position also requires ongoing communication and collaboration with community partners, and the ELO coordinator at Site A invests significant time networking with local employers and members of the community.

The ELO coordinator and district leadership have set an ultimate goal of 100% ELO participation for high school students by graduation. Students can access ELOs through their guidance counselors, teacher suggestions for independent study, and increasingly, by working directly with the ELO coordinator. Opportunities in the school are student driven, with a stated purpose of creating experiences that "students complete in order to earn credits in high school," as well as providing support for learners to engage in multiple pathways. As such, the district encourages students to participate in dual enrollment, independent study, service learning projects, and internships as a part of their ELO program. Once a need or opportunity is identified, the ELO coordinator works with each student, coordinating with other teachers or staff members as necessary, to develop a plan for participation, responsibilities, and assessment.

## **Case Study Site Profiles: District B, Site B**

Site B is one of four high schools in District B, which serves the largest city in Maine. Geographically smaller than District A, this district consists of 18 elementary, middle and high schools and operates four high schools. District data indicate that the overall student body is 52% white, with 50% of all students qualifying for FRL, a 2020 census of 6495 students across all schools and grades, of whom 1495 are ELL students, and a district budget of approximately \$120M.

The ELO position at Site B began in 2013 with funding from the Nellie Mae Foundation, as part of a \$5 million districtwide grant to support high schools' implementation of selected learning models. Site B opted to use the Johns Hopkins Talent Development model,<sup>4</sup> which is specifically targeted at high schools serving vulnerable populations. The Nellie Mae grant also included funds to develop specially tailored internship opportunities for students. This funding resulted in the creation of the ELO coordinator position at two high schools in the district, including at Site B. Each coordinator works closely with the building principal, guidance counselors, and faculty. In addition, the ELO coordinator works with the district's Director of Community Partnerships/Multilingual Center.

Under the school's career development approach, all students at Site B have access to the same activities during their high school career: mock job interviews in 9th grade, and a one-day job shadow in 10th grade, and optional internships during 11th and 12th grades. As part of their role, the ELO coordinator organizes and matches students with these opportunities. Regardless of whether they are referred or recruited by teachers or guidance counselors, all high school students have access to the coordinator. Given that all students are engaged in opportunities starting in 9th grade, they are all familiar with the ELO coordinator and their role in arranging mock interviews, job shadows, internships, summer opportunities, volunteer and service work, and potentially, employment opportunities. In addition, the district publishes information on types of opportunities, and how to access these, as part of student handbooks and orientation. While all students are given equal access to ELOs, the coordinator focuses on providing options for students who may require additional assistance to access internships in particular.

## **Purpose & Impact of ELOs**

A key finding in this study is that perspectives on the *purpose* and *impact* of ELOs - both as intended and in practice - vary significantly across our respondents. Interview responses to questions about purpose and impact yielded a broad and sometimes surprising set of responses. Some respondents viewed ELOs as serving

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.talentdevelopmentsecondary.com/>



specifically individual purposes for students; others reflected on the ways that ELOs serve as crucial connections between school and community. Views on impact were similarly varied. The resulting conclusion is that ELOs serve many different purposes and result in a diverse set of outcomes for different groups (i.e. students, families, schools, and community partners). Overall, respondents were split in viewing ELO outcomes as a *means to an end* versus *ends in themselves*. In other words, one dominant view is that ELOs are a vehicle for delivering a set of broader impacts such as improved graduation rates or greater employability. An alternative (though not conflicting) perspective is that ELOs are an independent good, regardless of what later-term outcomes might result. Below, we detail the dominant themes identified in our analysis of the purposes and impacts of ELOs.

a) *Expanding opportunity*

In both case study sites, and more broadly across Maine, ELOs are viewed as essential factors in expanding opportunities for all students. ELOs can take a range of forms, as outlined previously. They might be semester-long internships, one-off job shadow experiences, independent study coursework, school-work partnerships, and more. Because school districts have some flexibility in the degree to which these experiences result in course credits or other credentials of value, ELOs have the potential to offer multiple points of access for students. They expand the availability of nontraditional credit-bearing options, giving students more flexibility and choice in fulfilling their school-based requirements.

In both case study sites, ELO coordinators strive to ensure that ELO opportunities are available to and accessed by students demographically representative of the school community at large. This is an important function of ELOs; they offer out-of-classroom opportunities that are typically available only to students with financial or social advantages. They serve as an important source of *social capital*, providing students with experience in and exposure to a wide range of workplace environments or occupational possibilities. These expanded opportunities help students develop skills and connections that will benefit them beyond high school. As one C3 member attests, "Students are pretty good at rising to the challenge, especially outside of the school building...[They] don't have very many professional interactions in [their] younger years and then all of a sudden, [they] have to start doing college interviews or have to go to [their] first job interview, or have to write an email to somebody... [A]nd any and all of these types of experiences really help students to grow in those areas and give them confidence."

Key to the function of ELOs in expanding opportunities is they can allow schools to leverage students' existing extracurricular activities as academic credit. For example, a student with an afterschool job (limiting the time and energy they might have available for homework or afterschool clubs) can work with their school's ELO coordinator to

create an independent study based on that job. Another student might earn elective credit due to their participation in a local community theater project. These opportunities for flexibility help remove barriers students might face due to inequities in resources.

*b) Meeting individual needs*

In addition to the more broad goal of expanding opportunity, ELOs also serve an important role in allowing schools to more substantively and effectively meet a diversity of student interests, experiences, needs, and skills. ELO opportunities can be specifically tailored to a student's unique circumstances, unlike traditional academic courses. In some cases, ELOs can provide credit recovery for students struggling to meet academic requirements for various reasons. In addition to the immediate impacts this can have on a student's academic standing, this flexibility also increases students' autonomy and self-determination.

The emphasis on individual student needs varies from site to site, of course. Both of our case study sites structure ELOs according at least in part to individual needs. At both sites, ELOs are sometimes viewed as opportunities for targeted skill development - one student at Site A, for example, worked with the ELO coordinator to develop an independent study on rocket building, a topic that was not covered in their existing coursework. At Site B, students have the option to earn credit through internships focused on their particular interests; there are few limits on the area or field of study. Some students have used this opportunity to develop research skills through journalism work, while others have learned screenprinting, political organizing, and data science through their internships. These are specific occupational or creative skills that students might not otherwise have opportunities to develop through traditional coursework.

ELOs also offer necessary flexibility to fit individual students' life circumstances. Another student at Site A struggled to fulfill the required credits for graduation because of work and financial responsibilities; the ELO coordinator worked with them to design a credit-bearing ELO leveraging time spent at their worksite, allowing the student to graduate on time. Students who are juggling family responsibilities alongside school often have limited time to pursue extracurricular activities; these opportunities that allow students to fulfill their academic requirements through out-of-school experiences can be a lifeline.

*c) Workforce development*

ELOs can and often do serve as opportunities for workplace skills and career development for students in our case study sites. At Site B, these opportunities are more formalized due to the school's structured talent development model, as all students complete a mock job interview and a one-day job shadow. These experiences emphasize work-specific skills such as email and interview etiquette, professional dress and behavior, timely attendance. At Site A, all students have the opportunity, but are not

required, to engage in a career-focused ELO. This might include a semester-long independent study on a particular occupational field, or a weekly visit to a jobsite. Likewise, these types of ELOs focus on the habits and experiences of *work*.

However, despite the statewide emphasis on workforce development and its natural intersection with the education sector, it does not appear to be *the* driving priority or goal of ELOs in Maine. This is not to suggest that it is considered unimportant; individuals doing ELO work in Maine recognize that ELOs can and do help address issues like career awareness, workplace skill development, and school-employer relationships. However, these considerations are not driving ELO programs. Among school staff at our case study sites and among the C3 members we talked to, there is a clear acknowledgement that ELOs help to teach and reinforce critical workplace habits and skills. Further, our respondents also report that employers and local business leaders share an interest with schools and families in developing these skills. Yet the primary drivers behind increased and improved ELO programs appear to be the two discussed above: expanding opportunity and meeting individual student needs.

## **Staffing**

A second key finding of this study relates to the critical role of staffing. The diversity of ELO programs necessarily means a diversity of staffing solutions. The work of ELOs sits at the intersection of advising, career development, curriculum, and guidance; as a result, there is not one clear cut answer to the question of whose responsibility it is to manage ELOs. As ELOs have become more widespread in Maine, school staff in various roles have taken on this work. Some schools or districts, like our case study sites, have hired dedicated ELO coordinators. This is a part- or full-time staff member who manages all aspects of a school's ELO program, from student recruitment to outreach to standards alignment to coordination with external partners. How to structure the staffing necessary to support ELO work is an important consideration at all levels of implementation.

In each of our interviews, and in our focus group, we ended the conversation with the same question: What is necessary to do ELO work successfully? Without exception, every respondent gave some version of the following answer: there must be a dedicated staff position to coordinating ELOs. Though there were many other responses that followed this one, it is clear that among people in Maine most deeply involved in ELO work, this answer always came first. There is a clear consensus that hiring an ELO coordinator is a critical first step to establishing a successful ELO program. The reasons for this are varied; the most obvious is that without a dedicated coordinator, the work falls to other teachers and staff members, whose time and energy is already spread thin. Another important reason is that there is a distinct skill set that ELO coordinators must possess to do their work effectively - a skill set that differs significantly from

administrators, guidance counselors, classroom teachers, and others who might fill this role. Our analysis identified several key archetypes embodied by ELO coordinators:

- 1) **Matchmaker:** In this role, the coordinator is responsible for finding productive matches between a student's needs, skills, and interests and potential ELO opportunities. This means possessing rapport-building skills to discern high-school age students' needs, an understanding of a vast range of job- or career-specific skills and responsibilities, and an ability to find connections that might not always be clear on the surface.
- 2) **Advisor:** ELO coordinators serve as life and academic advisors to their students, offering insight about course selection, postsecondary plans, and more. As above, this requires solid rapport with students as well as deep knowledge of not just the many life and career paths available to students but also the necessary steps to lead them to their desired path.
- 3) **Recruiter:** As a liaison between schools and local employers, ELO coordinators are also responsible for generating meaningful out-of-school opportunities, often from scratch. This means building relationships with local businesses and employers and recruiting them to develop opportunities that are mutually beneficial. In order to build new relationships and sustain ongoing ones, coordinators attend local Chamber of Commerce or city council meetings, arrange for guest speakers, and attend networking events and conferences.

### **Systemic Integration**

A recurring theme in our analysis is the extent to which ELOs are systemically integrated into a school or district's vision for educating and preparing students. There are many facets to integration in this case, including ELO alignment with curriculum, assessment, remediation, and overall guiding principles. In each of our case studies, we identified multiple points of integration at varying depths, as well as some points of divergence or independence.

In Site A, for example, the ELO program began with a districtwide overhaul of its Program of Study, designed to implement a multiple pathways approach for all students and grade levels in the district. The ELO coordinator position was developed alongside a revision of course and credit requirements and graduation standards, resulting in a clear alignment between the job responsibilities and the district vision. In addition to providing opportunities for career exploration, ELOs at Site A also offer students nontraditional options for credit recovery. For students who might have limited time and have had difficulty meeting credit requirements through traditional academic coursework, the integration of the ELO program with the multiple pathways approach means the opening of doors that were previously shut. According to the ELO coordinator, this integration is key to reaching as many students as possible: "I have the

trust and support of the administration and the guidance counselors, which is extremely key to this program, because they're the ones that helped me meet new students that I haven't made a partnership with or developed an ELO with."

In Site B, the ELO coordinator (one of two placed at high schools in the district) is viewed as a core piece of the district's prioritization of *equity*. ELOs in this district operate under the umbrella of the Youth Development Program alongside mentoring and college readiness programs. These programs offer community and academic support to parents and families, multilingual students, and future first-generation college students. Thus, ELOs at Site B are considered one part of a larger push to make a deep investment in equitable outcomes for students.

Among the ELO programs we observed, there are also many examples of how they function independently, operating with significant autonomy and flexibility. Part of this is due to the wide-ranging creative nature of the job; coordinators look far and wide to find meaningful and well-aligned opportunities for students, and independence allows them to move quickly when opportunities arise. ELO coordinators also function as one-person teams; they do not have peers or co-teachers within their school (though they often collaborate with building administrators and teachers to provide support to students). While ELO coordinators may have certification in a teaching field (allowing them to make credit determinations), there are no professional certifications or standards in this field. Each ELO coordinator's responsibilities and performance standards are individually determined and evaluated. Among the coordinators we spoke with, there was not widespread consensus over the benefits of professionalization of the role.

Morningstar, Lombardi, and Test (2018) argue that career and college readiness (CCR) activities should be embedded within multitiered systems of support; in other words, CCR is one type of approach within a larger framework of preparing students for postgraduate life. This sentiment is reflected in our findings, particularly at Site A where the focus on multiple pathways prioritizes an adaptive and flexible approach to student preparation.

Our conclusion is that there are benefits to deep system-wide integration of ELO programming, as it aids communication among collaborators, increases opportunities for creative programming, and reinforces the priorities of the school and/or district. These benefits contribute to the overall success and longevity of the ELO program, positioning the coordinator as a central figure in providing students with meaningful opportunities to prepare for and participate in post-graduate life. However, the independence that ELO coordinators and programs have is essential to the smooth functioning of the work. A lack of professional certification may make it difficult to prepare and recruit candidates to take on this type of work; however, the inherent need for flexibility in the role means that requiring certification may severely limit the possibilities for ELOs. For now, the networking and professional development offered by

C3 is an essential resource for ELO and ELO-adjacent school staff. Though it is a significant challenge, finding the right balance of autonomy and integration can help ELO programs thrive.

## **Discussion and Policy Implications**

### **Objectives**

#### *a) Equity and opportunity*

In both of our case study sites, ELO staff emphasized both equity of access - ensuring that all students had access to ELOs according to their particular needs - and diversity of access - the importance of reaching a demographically representative group of students. The diversity of students accessing and benefiting from ELO participation, particularly along racial and socioeconomic lines, is viewed as a cornerstone of their success. At Site A, a school serving a mostly rural geographic region with a significant proportion of students living in poverty, administrators emphasized the importance of broadening access to opportunities that allow students to develop necessary postgraduate skills while also meeting their academic needs. In Site B, a high school in Maine's most racially diverse district, administrators emphasized the participation of a broad range of students across various socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, language, and academic performance groups. Students participating in ELOs closely match the demographics of the school as a whole. Though the total numbers are relatively small, preventing a meaningful quantitative comparison, the patterns of student participation indicate that ELOs are reaching a wide range of students. Among students participating in ELOS at Site B, the distribution of GPA, class rank, racial minority students, multilingual students, and students receiving special education services closely match those of the school as a whole. This is a point of pride for the school's ELO program; the coordinator and school administration are intentional about ensuring the participation of a broad range of students.

#### *b) Diversity of experiences*

ELOs expand the diversity of educational experiences available to students, allowing greater opportunities for deep learning beyond the walls of the classroom. They provide the necessary flexibility for schools to meet individual student needs, while simultaneously widening and deepening the scope of educational possibilities for all students. These nontraditional outlets open up spaces for teaching and learning that are often embedded in ongoing real world experiences, broadening students' exposure to many different types of teachers, mentors, and skill-building activities. ELOs also offer the possibility to develop a diversity of skills that are often not explicitly taught in traditional high school classes - the interpersonal and "soft" skills that are essential in

the workplace, in higher education, and life in general. For example, ELOs can provide opportunities for students to work in multi-age or multi-generational groups, a critical experience as youth transition from typically peer-centered environments. Specifically tailored ELOs can encourage students to further develop academic and artistic passions that might not be addressed in the standard curriculum, through dual enrollment or internship opportunities. In many ELO programs, students gain exposure to careers and life paths that they would otherwise not, expanding their imaginative possibilities for life beyond high school. This exposure is a crucial piece of the equity puzzle; it helps close the social capital gap by offering meaningful engagement and connection-building with community members and employers that might otherwise be inaccessible or out of view.

Our case study sites revealed a vast range of ELO experiences in which students have participated in the last three years, including the following fields and employers: architecture, food services, political advocacy, photography, interior design, metalwork and welding, creative writing, fashion design, journalism, marketing, aquaculture, and school leadership.

*c) Shifting possibilities for post-graduate life*

There is an emerging shift in national focus from “college and career readiness” to “life and career readiness,” reflecting a growing acknowledgement that attending a four-year college is neither a realistic nor worthwhile goal for all students. Further, this shift reflects an understanding that socioemotional learning is central to the project of postgraduate preparation. Students may apply the skills gained from ELO experiences specifically to their experiences in the workforce or in higher education, but these widely applicable 21st century skills (e.g., communication, collaboration, growth mindset, and critical thinking) are essential as young adults enter and engage in their communities. Rather than a shift away from college and career readiness, this might be best understood as a push to integrate instructional focus and opportunities, rather than silo them. One clear example of this is the College, Career, and Life Readiness (CCLR) Framework developed by Hobson’s and implemented by districts in 48 states (Oppelt, 2018). The CCLR Framework is a competency-based model that emphasizes the interconnectedness of its three components - career, college, and life - with socioemotional learning. The framework makes clear that schools must move beyond “college and career readiness”:

“The landscape of CCR is evolving. It is no longer adequate for schools to merely prepare students solely for admission to college. Students need to be prepared for life, and schools and districts must play a part in equipping them with the skills to navigate stressful situations, be successful learners, and to understand how to set goals and drive toward them. Students need to understand the opportunities

that are available to them after high school and how those pathways help them achieve their goals in life” (Oppelt, 2018, p. 5).

As discussed above, Maine’s adoption of the Life and Career Standards in 2020 has expanded the vision of a graduate to include a diversity of life goals and pathways. This shift opens the door to the inclusion of more standards-aligned nontraditional or out-of-school academic opportunities like ELOs. These opportunities also provide space for students to develop the skills of collaboration, teamwork, and communication that are so essential in the workplace, in college, and in the community. In our study, respondents universally affirmed the importance of skills gained through ELOs as preparation for life beyond high school, regardless of the path a student takes.

#### *d) Rethinking Remote Education Ventures (RREV)*

A promising avenue for expanding ELO work in Maine is the newly-implemented Rethinking Remote Education Ventures (RREV) program. In mid-2020, the Maine Department of Education was awarded a grant from the US Department of Education’s “Rethink K-12 Education Models” funding. Maine was one of only eleven states to receive funding, a grant totaling almost \$17M. Maine’s RREV project is designed to foster innovation in remote learning, a topic of utmost importance in K-12 education during the COVID crisis, and beyond<sup>5</sup>. The RREV model contemplates using grant funds to foster both innovative thinking and an entrepreneurial mindset among the Maine K-12 educators involved in the program, as well as providing resources to fund and evaluate selected innovative pilots, and share data on successful pilots with all districts in Maine, via the “Engine – RREV’s collaboration portal”. The RREV program allows selected educators to develop innovative programs (that is, novel programs for their districts) in one or more of four distinct but potentially related educational domains – Outdoor Education, Flexible (multiple) pathways, Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs), and Online Learning<sup>6</sup>. For schools and districts that have yet to explore ELOs or that wish to innovate or expand their ELO work, RREV offers a potential source of funding and professional development opportunities.

## **Challenges**

ELO work is not without its challenges, some of which have already been discussed. Many of these challenges are inherent to the project itself, as a result of the dynamic nature of collaborative work. Others are external, such as the extent to which ELOs are affected by broader policy issues like accountability and funding. Our study uncovered a number of key challenges or barriers to successful ELO implementation, described in detail below.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://marketscale.com/industries/education-technology/maine-doe-awarded/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.maine.gov/doe/rrev>



a) *Staffing*

As discussed at length in our findings and in studies cited in this report, the creation and maintenance of a dedicated ELO coordinator position is perhaps the single most critical factor in determining the success or failure of ELOs in a given district. Unless a coordinator position already exists, districts will find it difficult to reallocate funding within an already tight budget.

This does not mean that ELO work is impossible without a full-time coordinator; some districts have found creative ways to create or sustain ELO positions, by piecing together part-time positions or through external grants. One ELO coordinator told us that, "Every school system in the state has the ability to do this, especially if you examine some of the trends that are happening...You can retool a lot of the positions within districts, to create a halftime coordinator or marry it with two halftime coordinators." However, a dedicated, funded position is correlated with an increased diversity of opportunities in a district, powerful long-term relationships with community partners, higher participation rates among student populations, and a more flexible, individualized approach to ELO. This flexibility is critical if ELOs are to be useful in creating multiple pathways to graduate and meeting the evolving needs of students and community partners. Districts that do not fund a dedicated position are likely to be constrained by "bandwidth" issues in terms of both student participation, diversity and number of community partnerships, and ability of part-time coordinators to create individual opportunities on a per student basis.

The diverse skill set required to do the work of an ELO coordinator can make the role challenging to staff and support. While many coordinators can develop these skills on the job, there exists no training or certification program to prepare them, nor is there an organized professional development organization to support their ongoing learning. C3 was established, in part, to help facilitate the professional growth and connections among individuals doing ELO work in Maine. They serve as a relationship- and knowledge-building organization to promote and support this work. Yet because their roles do not slot neatly into existing school-based staff classifications, there is a distinct lack of formal structures available to ELO coordinators.

Further, when the ELO position is not deeply integrated into a district's vision (through staffing structure, curriculum, standards, etc), there is a risk that important ELO knowledge is siloed rather than distributed. This can mean that the person with whom that knowledge resides becomes more important than the work; if that individual leaves, the knowledge leaves with them and the school/district has to begin again. Again, this helps to highlight the importance of the work being done by C3 to build professional ELO knowledge and networks across Maine.

### *b) Transportation*

As evidenced by the Nellie Mae (2016) study of ELOs in New Hampshire, virtual ELOs are simply not effective when compared to in-person ELOs. In-person opportunities and enrichments are more effective and desirable from both a student and community partner perspective. However, in-person ELOs create an additional burden of transportation, and that burden is likely to be disproportionately felt.

As with many other community resources in Maine, transportation is not evenly distributed or equally accessible. Students in rural communities face considerable challenges when accessing opportunities that are distant from their high school campus and the established bus routes that service it. Alternative public transport options may be sparse or non-existent. Taxi or Uber type car sharing services are rarely an accessible or affordable option in rural districts. Students in urban communities face constraints of public transportation routes and schedules not aligning with locations or schedules of community based opportunities. Private vehicle accessibility, parental availability for transport, or student drivers license status are frequently tied to family socio-economic status, and can be considered a significant constraint for students in many Maine communities. Simply put, access to transportation is not equitably distributed. To expand opportunities and leverage the widest range of potential opportunities for students to engage in the most broad economic community, they must be able to access off-campus spaces. Any program looking to expand access to ELOs in Maine should include transportation considerations as a requisite aspect of the program design.

### *c) Regional industry disparities*

ELO opportunities depend on local industry; students' experiences are for the most part limited to their geographic location. Businesses and industries are not equally distributed throughout Maine. Portland has few forestry businesses but numerous design and advertising agencies. Rumford lacks a robust aquaculture and fisheries sector. Orono has more breweries than Dexter, but fewer than Biddeford and Saco (<https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Maine/Industries>). Unfortunately for Maine students, there is not necessarily a full spectrum of ELOs available to them in their home town, thus limiting the allure and efficacy of ELOs for all students. Addressing inequities in transportation may solve some of this inefficiency, but logistical limitations will remain. Virtual or remote opportunities may be effective solutions for some industries and occupations (architecture, advertising, or digital media occupations), but less practical for others (culinary arts/brewing, or healthcare).

## Questions & Future Work

What is the future of ELOs in Maine? There is clear momentum toward the expanded application of and participation in ELOs; however, significant questions remain. Further, ELOs live in a liminal policy space. For the most part, they have emerged out of grassroots efforts to offer robust out-of-school opportunities for students to develop life and career-specific skills, absent any formal policy structures. Yet ELOs intersect significantly with regulated school activities as well as labor policy. It is clear that as the work grows and develops, more input from policymakers and other stakeholders will be necessary. In this section, we explore some of the most significant questions and possibilities for future work.

- 1) What are the short- and long-term outcomes of ELOs for students, communities, and employers? Maine does not currently use any standardized assessment of students' career readiness or 21st Century/life skills. Evidence of ELO impact is both holistic and anecdotal; it is also quite difficult to tease out the effects of ELOs from the many other avenues through which students develop these skills. In our case study sites, students are assessed on their ELO work according to criteria established by the ELO coordinators. Though nearly every person we spoke to over the course of this study expressed a belief in the positive and robust impact of ELOs on students, measuring this impact will prove a challenge. The CCLR Framework, discussed earlier in this report, offers one possible approach to measuring impact; Hobson's has developed assessment tools that districts can use to gauge students' skills in collaboration, communication, teamwork, and critical thinking. Going forward, districts may consider this or other methods to supplement their internal ELO evaluation efforts.
- 2) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected - or how might it shape - the future of ELOs? There are many unknowns that will factor into the future of ELOs in Maine. One, of course, is the impact of COVID. The pandemic has had immeasurable effects on education, from budgets to staffing to remote education and extracurricular activities. ELOs often require students to leave the school building and spend time in out-of-school settings. Restrictions on students and businesses alike have forced shifts in the way ELOs have been carried out during the 20-21 school year, including the adoption of more remote and outdoor experiences; whether those shifts persist remains to be seen. Further, significant impacts on students' in-person time have prompted educators to think more flexibly about how to meet students' individual needs, which opens the door to more widespread use of ELOs.

- 3) What types of regulations are necessary to protect students, while still allowing the flexibility and autonomy that are hallmarks of the work? As ELOs operate on a district-to-district basis, there are no formal statewide requirements or laws in place to regulate them; this raises questions at the intersection of education and labor, particularly in the area of policy. When students leave the school building for educational experiences (as they often do for field trips, or when enrolled in Career and Technical Education programs), there are important safety and training issues to consider. Students might be working with or around dangerous mechanical equipment, or they may participate in public-facing activities that are not supervised by school staff. Additionally, in many work environments, employees receive site-specific training related to issues such as sexual harassment and first aid. As non-employees, students engaged in on-site ELO activities exist in a grey regulatory area. Since ELOs are not specifically defined or regulated by any statewide body, it is unclear with whom these responsibilities lie. One way to address these potential vulnerabilities is to have clearly defined language, roles, and responsibilities for participating parties. The Maine Department of Education is currently working with a group of stakeholders - including C3 members - to outline clear definitions and expectations for specific types of ELOS. Yet the nature of ELOs is by definition amorphous. Many of the opportunities in which students engage and earn credit do not fall neatly into categories such as internships, apprenticeships, or mentorships. As more and more schools look to ELOs as a way to expand students' out-of-school learning options, how can relevant parties ensure that all participants are protected?
  
- 4) How can individuals doing ELO work continue to find opportunities for collaboration and professional development, and what structures can support these efforts? The grassroots efforts of C3 have built a growing and essential network of ELO professionals. However, their reach may be limited by awareness, capacity, and geography. As a group, C3 can offer advice and support to schools or districts hoping to build a new ELO program; this depends, of course, on interested parties being aware of the network. Further, without codified language to define what constitutes an ELO, there are likely to be many instances where ELO work is happening despite not being named as such.

These questions and the answers that follow will chart the course for ELO development in Maine going forward. Paying careful attention to the promises and challenges of this work will allow policymakers to focus on the key areas in need of support, and can potentially extend these enriching opportunities to more and more students across the state.

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