



# Building Family Economic Security: Rising Futures Maine's Community- Anchored 2Gen Approach

## AT A GLANCE

This brief reviews the two-generation landscape in Maine, emphasizing community-based organizations' work with Rising Futures Maine to support student parents' educational persistence and financial stability through a whole-family approach.

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## **About Jobs for the Future**

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# Executive Summary

Maine has a strong foundation of support for student parents. Financial support programs like Parents as Scholars, Higher Opportunity for Pathways to Employment (HOPE), and the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP), alongside policies that connect income supports, education, and workforce development, offer real opportunities for parents to access economic opportunity through training and school. Yet, despite these advances, many parents—especially those from low-income households—still struggle to access the education, child care, transportation, and living-wage jobs needed to achieve long-term stability. This brief describes how the Rising Futures Maine initiative, supported by the John T. Gorman Foundation, is strengthening community-based organizations (CBOs) as local two-generation (2Gen) leaders that can connect student parents to concrete education and career pathways.

In Maine's Franklin County, the Franklin County Children's Task Force is codesigning pathways with Franklin County Adult Education, blending intensive cohort-based coaching, child care, transportation, and barrier removal with demand-driven training that leads to industry-recognized credentials. The Journey Program of Kennebec County-based, Maine Children's Home's is evolving into a 2Gen hub that integrates parenting education, case management, counseling, and postsecondary navigation—supported by new data tools for tracking parents' goals—so young parents can move from high school into college and careers with coordinated supports for their children. In Washington County, StartUp Downeast is piloting a 2Gen model focused on fathers and noncustodial parents that links entrepreneurship, coaching, and child-outcome tracking, addressing long-standing gaps in engaging fathers while maintaining a strong commitment to parent-led program design.

The brief concludes with five interconnected recommendations for state policymakers and practitioners to sustain and scale this work, including increased funding for CBOs implementing 2Gen strategies; sufficient, predictable financial support for parents that enables them to pursue associate's and bachelor's degrees with real labor-market value; and more flexible, stackable postsecondary pathways aligned with parents' goals and family-sustaining jobs. This brief also calls for stronger, more consistent student-parent data collection and analysis, as well as reinforced basic-needs protections, especially in light of looming federal safety-net cuts that could push thousands of Maine families into deeper insecurity. Together, Rising Futures Maine and the broader policy ecosystem demonstrate that when communities and systems align around parent voice, navigation, and sustained material support, student parents and their children are far more likely to thrive across generations.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Maine has a strong 2Gen policy and program foundation, but gaps remain.** Decades of investments (including Parents as Scholars, HOPE, CSSP, free community college, and child care and anti-poverty legislation) have built a substantive 2Gen infrastructure, yet many parents still struggle to access quality child care, transportation, and living-wage jobs.
2. **Rising Futures Maine demonstrates the power of community-based 2Gen partnerships.** The three pilots—with the Franklin County Children’s Task Force, Maine Children’s Home’s Journey Program, and StartUp Downeast—show how trusted local organizations, in partnership with education and workforce providers, can align navigation, coaching, child care, barrier removal, and data use to help student parents persist in education and move toward family-sustaining work.
3. **Scaling impact will require sustained investment, better data, and stronger basic-needs protections.** This brief calls for funding for CBOs; predictable financial support and flexible, stackable pathways for parents; statewide student-parent data strategies; and bolstered safety-net protections in light of looming federal cuts that could push thousands of Maine families into deeper insecurity.

# Introduction

Across Maine, there is a broad understanding that families need support in unlocking economic opportunities. Long-standing financial assistance programs like Parents as Scholars (PaS) and HOPE make parents' postsecondary education an explicit anti-poverty strategy, while recent child care legislation, workforce investments, statewide collaboratives, and regional 2Gen pilots give the state concrete platforms to build on.

Within this strong foundation for 2Gen work, the Rising Futures Maine initiative is exploring how community-based human services organizations can strengthen programs and practices to connect families with economic opportunities. Specifically, Rising Futures Maine sites are expanding their own capacity to thoroughly support student parents in accessing education, training, and employment in in-demand occupations. To do this, they are developing and strengthening partnerships with education providers to collaborate, codesign programs, and change practices to make a difference in the lives of student parents.

This brief describes the national and state context for student parents, highlights Maine's existing 2Gen assets, and illustrates how Rising Futures Maine partners are building on those assets to advance family economic well-being. The brief concludes with recommendations for the future.



# Why a Two-Generation Approach Matters

A 2Gen approach is a strategy that centers family well-being by working with both parents and their children simultaneously. Success is measured through both parent-centered and child-centered outcomes. By centering the family, 2Gen approaches “create a legacy of educational success and economic prosperity,” as Ascend at the Aspen Institute puts it.<sup>1</sup>

This legacy is supported by evidence: Parents’ educational attainment has significant implications for their children’s outcomes. A \$3,000 increase in family income during early childhood is associated with an increase of about 17% in those children’s future earnings.<sup>2</sup> Such benefits extend beyond families into larger communities and regional economies.

In addition, Maine’s ability to build a workforce that meets the needs of employers and supports economic growth is dependent on supporting parents in accessing education and training. Maine’s own economic vision reflects this connection. The first strategy outlined in the state’s Economic Development Strategy is “grow local talent,” which calls for ensuring that every person in Maine can reach their full potential by accessing credentials of value.<sup>3</sup>

Achieving this goal requires the support and structures that student parents need to attain credentials of value. Supporting student parents and investing in 2Gen approaches is therefore not only a family well-being strategy but also a workforce and economic development imperative.



## Defining a 2Gen approach

2Gen approaches aim to integrate services and supports to move the whole family forward, benefiting both the child and the adult(s) in their lives. (Ascend at the Aspen Institute)

# The Student-Parent Landscape

For families seeking greater economic stability, postsecondary education is often the logical option. Yet being a student parent is immensely challenging, particularly for parents living in low-income households. The multiple demands of caretaking can get in the way of coursework and studying, and many parents work while they're in school, adding to what's on their plate. For parents who reduce their course loads so they can continue to work, earning their degree becomes a long-term goal rather than a short-term sacrifice with a quick return on investment.

Across the country, millions of parents are attempting to manage this balance of education, work, and caregiving. Some estimates show that over 3 million undergraduate students—almost 1 in 5—are parents of dependent children.<sup>4</sup> There are almost 1.6 million parenting students enrolled in community and technical colleges, representing nearly 22% of that student population.<sup>5</sup>

Student parents are often in a precarious economic situation; 68% of them live below 200% of the federal poverty line.<sup>6</sup> One survey showed that 53% of student parents had experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days; in the previous year, 68% had experienced housing insecurity, and 17% had experienced homelessness.<sup>7</sup>

The harsh realities and sacrifices that so many student parents face have negatively impacted education persistence and completion rates for this population. Student parents are nearly



*Supporting student parents and investing in 2Gen approaches is therefore not only a family well-being strategy but also a workforce and economic development imperative.*

twice as likely as nonparents to leave college without a credential, even when earning similar grades.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, median student debt for student parents is two and a half times higher than for students without children.<sup>9</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is critical to recognize not just the challenges but also the aspirations of student parents. Student parents deserve not only to be economically stable but to pursue their dreams, which are often for their children's futures as well as their own.

Given the very real challenges they face, student parents need robust support to be able to access and persist toward their educational goals. As Sheri Wilkens, HOPE program director

at the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, shared, “We call it a student empowerment program because our parents decided to change their stars independently, and our job is to make their dreams come true, right? Let us worry about some of those financial worries, and you worry about getting good grades and earning that credential and moving forward in your life.”

The HOPE program is just one example of a statewide asset in Maine that supports student parents' pursuit of postsecondary education. The next section of this brief describes 2Gen assets in more detail and shows how they create a strong platform for initiatives like Rising Futures Maine.



# Maine's 2Gen Assets and Policy Infrastructure

In 1997, Maine became one of the first states in the country to allow parents who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to count postsecondary education as their work requirement, through the creation of the Parents as Scholars program. In addition to PaS, the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program, administered through Maine's Department of Labor, was established in 2007, and



HOPE, administered through the state's Department of Health and Human Services, was established in 2018. CSSP and HOPE are education support programs that pay students' tuition and provide them with access to navigators and support services. CSSP is for adults whose earnings are 275% or less of the federal poverty level for Maine, and HOPE is specifically for parents at or under 225%. Since 2023, Maine has offered recent high school graduates tuition-free enrollment at any of its seven community colleges. In addition, the Harold Alfond Center for the Advancement of Maine's Workforce offers free prehire, industry-aligned training programs (some of which include stipends) that offer an affordable and accessible pathway into in-demand occupations. These programs are an important asset for parents seeking to enroll in postsecondary education and training.

Recent impact reports from both HOPE and CSSP describe positive outcomes on earnings and full-time employment for students who receive support. Annual earnings nearly tripled for HOPE participants who completed a bachelor's degree and more than doubled for participants who earned an associate's degree (comparing earnings two years before enrollment with earnings two years after program completion).<sup>10</sup> CSSP participation is also associated with increases in employment rates, full-time employment, and earnings (compared with pre-enrollment levels), across all demographic groups and occupational pathways.<sup>11</sup>

Maine Equal Justice, a nonprofit civil legal aid and economic justice organization, launched Build HOPE in 2022 as a short-term project to bolster support for student parents receiving assistance through PaS, HOPE, or the Additional Support for People in Retraining and Education (ASPIRE) program.<sup>12</sup> Build HOPE included up to \$2,000 in additional cash assistance to students to address urgent unmet needs for themselves or their families while they attended school. In the project's first year, 221 families accessed the Build HOPE fund. Maine Equal Justice administered this funding through December 2025 and distributed nearly \$2.9 million to 1,800 children and their families.<sup>13</sup> According to Build HOPE's final report, transportation was the biggest need among families who accessed assistance, followed by housing and utilities.<sup>14</sup>

The data underscores that when parents can access postsecondary education with strong supports, they experience meaningful and lasting economic gains in alignment with 2Gen goals. To continue to learn from student-parent experiences and outcomes, Maine needs a statewide data strategy that moves toward a shared understanding of where student parents access education. Beneficial programs like HOPE, PaS, and CSSP have historically been underenrolled. To connect eligible students to the resources Maine has available, leaders should implement a consistent data collection and analysis approach to help practitioners better understand which students need support.

## Cross-Sector Initiatives Advancing Family Economic Security

Maine's recent history illustrates an established and growing commitment to supporting families through cross-sector and multi-stakeholder initiatives, as evidenced by the creation of HOPE, PaS, and CSSP.

The Whole Family Approach to Jobs initiative ran from 2017 to 2025 as a partnership between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families Region 1 Office and the National Conference of State Legislatures, with later support from the American Public Human Services Association. The initiative supported state leaders across New England in developing

program, policy, and system solutions to help parents achieve employment gains and to implement whole-family approaches that foster family economic well-being. Maine stakeholders, including state legislators, executive branch leaders, education nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, business, and parents, determined the focus of this statewide work and emerged with a particular emphasis on benefit cliff reforms.<sup>15</sup> A family hits a benefits cliff when a small increase in income causes a sudden decrease or complete loss in benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), housing assistance, or cash assistance, leaving it financially worse off despite earning more. As a result of the Whole Family Approach to Jobs initiative, Maine was one of the first states in the country to document the impact of benefit cliffs on



families. That led the state to pilot a customized version of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta’s Career Ladder Identifier and Financial Forecaster (CLIFF) dashboard, a tool that illustrates the financial effect of education and career choices.<sup>16</sup>

A separate statewide working group, Invest in Tomorrow, identifies and advocates for policy changes that could help Maine reach its goal of cutting child poverty in half by 2029. The group determined its priorities through community conversations and stakeholder engagement and continues to track progress on a number of economic and child wellness indicators, including poverty measures; levels of housing, health care, and food insecurity; education; and incomes for TANF recipients.<sup>17</sup>

The themes and priorities of these initiatives lent themselves to 2Gen solutions as a core strategy for helping Maine families achieve economic security. As a result, the Maine Legislature passed pieces of legislation that have improved the outlook for families in Maine, including An Act to Reduce Child Poverty by Leveraging Investments in Families Today (LIFT), An Act to Reduce Child Poverty by Leveraging Investments in Families for Tomorrow (LIFT 2.0), An Act to Reduce Poverty by Leveraging Investments so Families Can Thrive (LIFT 3.0), and An Act to Secure Transitions to Economic Prosperity for Maine Families and Children (STEP). LIFT 3.0 and STEP were bipartisan bills and were unanimously passed by the legislature as a package. Taken all together, these laws enacted a suite of anti-poverty solutions, including the creation of the HOPE program, an



increase in cash benefits for TANF recipients, an increase in the earned income disregard level for TANF recipients, an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit benefit, and transitional Medicaid and food assistance to mitigate the effect of the benefits cliff.<sup>18</sup> These pieces of legislation also codified opportunities for parent voice and leadership in the TANF program.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to employing income-bolstering strategies, improving access to quality child care is central to many 2Gen approaches. Recent legislation has also strengthened child care access by creating subsidies and increasing wages for child care providers. Maine's Child Care Affordability Program subsidizes child care for families whose income is under 125% of Maine's median income. LD 1726 was passed in 2026 to provide funding to serve more families through the program and calls for the creation of an advisory board charged with developing

a sustainability plan to ensure that the fund can continue to meet families' needs.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, despite these important policy steps, parents' experiences indicate that there isn't enough quality child care across the state to meet families' needs. More consistent data on student parents across education pathways and programs could help organization better understand the size of the need. The persistent child care shortage reinforces the need for local, relationship-based solutions that can complement statewide efforts; this is one of the roles Rising Futures Maine partners are helping to address.

Taken together, these policies, programs, and initiatives form a strong 2Gen infrastructure. Rising Futures Maine builds on this infrastructure by centering local CBOs as critical partners in advancing student-parent success.

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# Rising Futures Maine: Centering Community-Based Organizations

Maine clearly has invested stakeholders who have spent the past decade building momentum and advocating for policies that center family economic opportunity and child well-being. But even with these policy and programmatic initiatives, many parents across the state still struggle to access what they need to become economically stable and achieve the goals they have for themselves and their



children. This is where family-centered human services programs come in: They are uniquely positioned to support the well-being of the entire family. In Maine, the landscape of family-centered organizations is quite diverse in terms of the services provided, funding models, and geographic focus. Community Action Programs are another essential provider of whole-family programs, both in Maine and across the country, and key partners to other CBOs, including those in Rising Futures Maine.

The Rising Futures Maine initiative centers on supporting these community-based human services organizations as leaders of 2Gen strategies that can support the families they work with. The three sites participating in Rising Futures Maine have deep roots and trust with the families in their communities, and this positioning can play an important role in helping families access the support they need.

However, these organizations cannot do this work alone, especially when the challenges are so great. According to Lightcast data, in the three counties where there are Rising Futures

Maine programs—Kennebec, Washington, and Franklin—the estimated living wage for a single adult with two children ranges from \$46.22 to \$49.27 an hour. For two adults with one child, it ranges from \$36.56 to \$37.40 an hour, and for two adults and two children, it ranges from \$40.68 to \$41.69 per hour. A limited number of occupations in those counties offer those pay levels, and most of those jobs require postsecondary degrees or credentials. Access to postsecondary education is a critical pathway to achieving financial stability.

With funding from the John T. Gorman Foundation, Rising Futures Maine explicitly invests in pilot partnerships between CBOs and education providers to expand the state's capacity to serve student parents and their families. Each partner brings unique strengths in supporting parents and families. CBOs have experience in meeting families' needs, including providing parenting education, child care, social capital, financial coaching, and other wraparound supports. Education providers can bring expertise in designing educational pathways and partnering with employers.

*The three sites participating in Rising Futures Maine have deep roots and trust with the families in their communities*

# County-Level 2Gen Strategies in Action

## **Parent Voice and Leadership: A Central Tenet of 2Gen Work**

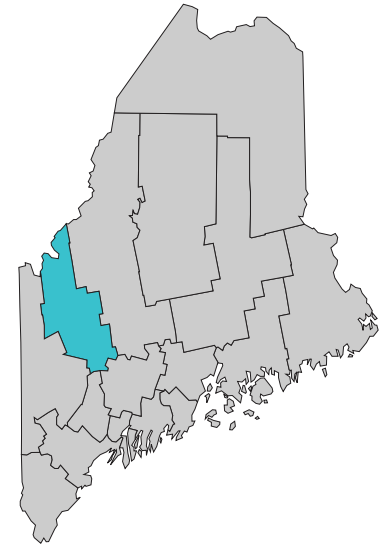
Parent voice is at the heart of effective 2Gen strategies because parents are the true experts on their families' strengths, needs, and aspirations. When parents help shape programs, services become more relevant and more equitable and are more likely to support genuine economic mobility.

Across all three Rising Futures Maine sites, parents are positioned as leaders and codesigners, not just recipients of services. Each site has compensated parent advisors who participate in meetings, coaching sessions, and an in-person event. These advisors help guide decisions about education and career pathways, identify wraparound service needs, and offer critical insight into the role each organization plays in its community.

Rising Futures Maine sites are also deepening opportunities for peer support, building on both the compensated parent-advisor role and facilitated cohort models so that parents can learn from, encourage, and advocate alongside one another.

## Franklin County Children’s Task Force (Rising Futures Franklin)

The Franklin County Children’s Task Force (FCCTF) is participating in Rising Futures Maine to knit together a more intentional pathway for current or potential student parents. The task force, which operates Rising Futures Franklin (RFF), is serving a cohort of parents whose families work with the agency through its other programming, including home visits, parenting education, supervised visitation, and after-school programming. The cohort members meet individually with RFF staff members and also come together as a group. Within this space, staff members are piloting coaching, navigation, and barrier-removal supports while parents build peer connections and social capital around shared education, career, and family goals.



### From referrals to codesigned pathways

A deepening partnership with Franklin County Adult Education (FCAE) sits at the heart of the task force’s strategy. FCCTF and FCAE are moving beyond referrals to codesign pathways and clarify roles that harness the strengths of each partner. Instead of taking a “warm handoff” approach, the RFF cohort sets goals related to education and career that FCAE supports through career navigation and advising, while FCCTF concurrently provides coaching and barrier removal. Danielle Redican, the college and career navigator at FCAE, shared that she sees potential for the partnership to grow and evolve over time. Knowing about the services that the task force provides has made her better able to counsel parents who are looking to go back to school but are concerned about accessing quality child care options.

Looking ahead to this summer, FCAE will offer three demand-driven cohort-style training programs: one leading to an education technician certification; one leading to a behavioral health professional certification; and, in partnership with

### COUNTY-LEVEL STRATEGIES IN ACTION

#### Franklin County

- Deepened partnership with Franklin County Adult Education.
- Expanded career navigation and advising.
- Launched demand-driven training pathways.
- Strengthened child care and wraparound supports.

employer Bath Iron Works, one leading to a manufacturing technician certification that includes a stipend during training. FCCTF will offer participants child care services alongside facilitated peer support, individualized coaching, and social capital opportunities, as well as other wraparound supports, such as transportation.

The training programs are intensive; the schedule will often be eight hours per day, five days per week. That underscores the need for the role FCCTF is playing in providing quality, consistent child care and other supports to help student parents persist through and complete such demanding training.

Beyond program design, FCCTF is intentionally listening to its community. A countywide listening tour is bringing staff members to every town in Franklin County to ask families and providers what they need to thrive, and to codesign solutions to the challenges that families are facing. FCCTF is implementing a cohesive, county-level strategy that combines cohort-based coaching, deep educational partnerships, service integration, and community voice in service of student parents and their children.

Brittany Parlin, a member of the first RFF cohort, shared that she hopes going back to school will make her a “role model to my daughter and show her how education can help you in life, but also how it’s a balancing act.” Parlin said that having people in her corner who are willing to connect her to the right resources and knowing she’s not alone are powerful motivators. She said that although she feels that she has worked hard her whole life, she will always be on the “struggle side, working paycheck to paycheck.” But, she added, programs that provide both tangible and moral support, like RFF does, make you feel like “maybe you can do it.”

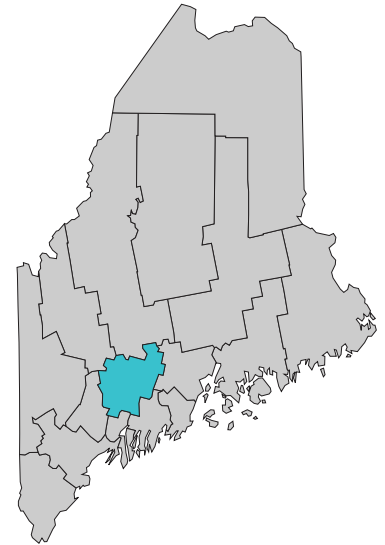


## Maine Children’s Home (Journey Program)

At Maine Children’s Home in Waterville, the Journey Program is the clear center of gravity for its participation in Rising Futures Maine. The program serves young parents, primarily teenagers, with prenatal and parenting education and wraparound supports. Through Rising Futures Maine, Maine Children’s Home is treating the Journey Program as a 2Gen hub, where trusting relationships with families are the starting point for education and career conversations, goal setting, referrals, and long-term follow-up.

Internally, Maine Children’s Home is weaving together the strengths of the Journey Program with its other services, including case management and counseling, so that parents experience a coordinated package of support. Rather than navigating benefits, child care, transportation, and school decisions separately, parents can work with staff members who are intentionally aligned around a shared plan. This integration is also taking a physical form: The organization is repurposing one of its buildings as a family center where families can receive integrated services under one roof.

These shifts are visible in the experience of Aimee Houde, a Journey Program participant who first connected with Alaina Wolman, director of the program, while in high school, after learning that she was pregnant. At first, Houde sought social and emotional support and parenting education. After graduating from high school in 2022 and taking time away from pursuing additional education, she returned to community college in fall 2025. Through Rising Futures Maine, Journey Program staff members were able to offer a high level of hands-on coaching to support Houde’s transition into postsecondary education: helping her fix a serious enrollment and financial aid error; connect to TRIO (federally funded student support services)



### COUNTY-LEVEL STRATEGIES IN ACTION

#### Maine Children’s Home

- Built the Journey Program into a stronger 2Gen hub.
- Coordinated navigation, case management, and counseling.
- Strengthened education and workforce partnerships.
- Improved goal tracking and data use.



for advising and weekly tutoring; enroll her younger child in an Educare school, with temporary funding for child care and transportation; and secure case management and services for her older son, who has an autism diagnosis and an Individualized Education Program. Over time, Houde has come to see Maine Children’s Home not only as a source of support in her parenting journey but also as a pathway into postsecondary education, a place for career exploration in her chosen field of early childhood education, and a coaching partner for long-term family stability.

### **From informal connections to structured relationships**

Externally, the Journey Program is moving from informal connections to more structured partnerships with local community colleges, adult education programs, and workforce development providers. Together, these partners are working to ensure that student parents can access advising, navigation, and financial supports that reflect the realities of parenting while in school.

Through this multifaceted work as part of Rising Futures Maine, the Journey Program is expanding its focus to include direct connections to education and workforce opportunities. This work encompasses internal knowledge and capacity building, strengthened external partnerships, and tools and systems that support participant-level data collection. Before Maine Children’s Home’s participation in Rising Futures Maine, the Journey Program built awareness of parents’ educational and career aspirations but did not implement standard tools to track educational or occupational goals, and it lacked formalized partnerships to offer services such as career navigation and advising. Currently, the program is implementing a participant survey and goal-tracking tools to surface parents’ baseline circumstances, learn about their education and career aspirations, and monitor their progress over time, with particular attention paid to child outcomes.

Staff members are already using those tools to prompt deeper conversations with parents about their futures, and they view the data as a way to guide continuous improvement and tell a clearer, more compelling story to partners about what the Journey Program is achieving for whole families. The program is connecting with Mid-Maine Regional Adult Community Education to offer career navigation and advising services to participants, alongside more intensive coaching that can support the connection to postsecondary education. In Houde's case, these strengthened systems and partnerships helped staff members coordinate a web of supports that made her return to college more feasible. Her story illustrates how intentional navigation and planning can turn broad aspirations into concrete, sequenced steps.

Additionally, the Journey Program is partnering with local high schools to offer credit for parenting education, transforming what was once a simple referral into a more substantive partnership that supports young participants in earning their high school diplomas. Through agreements with a local high school and an alternative school, referred students can now receive school credit for specific parenting education content they receive through the Journey Program.

The program is also bolstering its role as a navigator to ease the transition into school for student parents who are returning after an absence. Staff members have identified navigation assistance as a crucial and ongoing need because some students have struggled to access student success resources—which,

in some cases, has led to their dropping or stopping out. Attending critical meetings with students, supporting their access to resources such as tutoring and peer support, and helping them connect to child-centered services that align with their whole-family goals all contribute to persistence. For Houde, this kind of hands-on navigation has been essential to managing the complex demands of school, parenting, and service coordination.

## Looking ahead

Maine Children's Home is identifying a cohort of Journey Program participants preparing to transition to postsecondary education and considering ways to wrap them in cohort-based supports that blend navigation, resources, and peer connection. Identifying cohorts based on academic or career goals is new for the program, and staff members are using their growing knowledge of, and partnerships with, education providers, including Mid-Maine Regional Adult Community Education's college transitions program, to design programming tailored to this population. The Journey Program is expanding its role in helping parents identify and navigate education and career opportunities while deepening its understanding of the ecosystem of partners so that it doesn't operate in a silo.

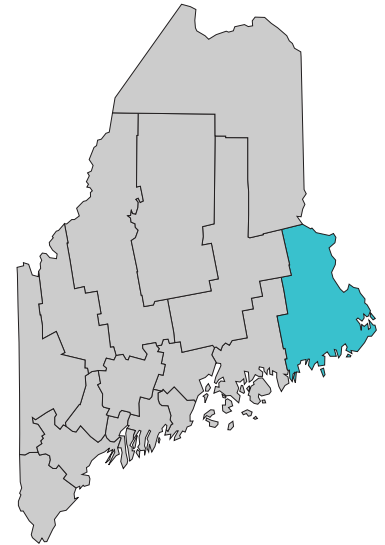
Through Rising Futures Maine, Maine Children's Home is steadily building an ecosystem around young parents that starts with strong relationships and grows into coordinated, data-informed pathways to education and economic mobility for both parents and children.

## StartUp Downeast

In Washington County, StartUp Downeast (SUDE) is participating in Rising Futures Maine to tackle a long-standing gap in many 2Gen systems: meaningfully engaging fathers and noncustodial parents. SUDE was originally designed as an entrepreneurship program for students enrolled at Washington County Community College who were eligible to receive SNAP, and it unexpectedly drew in a significant number of fathers. The team operating StartUp Downeast is also part of the leadership of Family Futures Downeast (FFD), a longstanding 2Gen program in Washington County. FFD is collaboratively led by five organizations: Sunrise County Economic Council, the Community Caring Collaborative, Washington County Adult and Community Education, Washington County Community College, and University of Maine at Machias. The team is now seizing this opportunity to position SUDE as an intentional on-ramp into broader 2Gen supports under the same structure that governs FFD, especially for fathers and noncustodial parents—two populations that have historically been on the margins of family serving programs.

### From supporting mostly mothers to all parents

Over the decade that FFD has operated, it has served some fathers, but over 90% of its parent participants have been mothers. While the program has demonstrated success with the fathers it has reached, the team wanted to better understand that success and explore how to apply it more intentionally to that population. With a key commitment to centering family experience and input, the organizations conducted stakeholder listening sessions, interviews, and focus groups with fathers, including members of the Passamaquoddy tribe. One key insight was that fathers and noncustodial parents often appeared to be less interested in a longer-term academic journey. As one FFD father shared, “I enjoy learning this, but I need to work and make money for my family.” The SUDE team knows from experience that despite these parents’ preference for a shorter timeline to



## COUNTY-LEVEL STRATEGIES IN ACTION

### StartUp Downeast

- Centered fathers and noncustodial parents.
- Linked entrepreneurship, training, and family coaching.
- Refined recruitment and referral pathways.
- Strengthened culturally relevant family supports.



economic return, they and their families can benefit from the relationship-based, family-centered coaching model.

The SUDE implementation strategy began as a pilot for systematic father and noncustodial parent engagement that includes opt-in 2Gen services—in contrast with the required 2Gen elements of FFD programming. The team is working to sharpen recruitment messages, strengthen referral pathways, and experiment with coaching structures that link entrepreneurship, occupational training, and whole-family goals. They are also integrating stronger practices that connect Passamaquoddy youth and families to programming within their communities, and ensuring that programming within their 2Gen approaches is culturally relevant. Additionally, they're looking closely at how internal processes and external requirements, including those around funding eligibility, shape fathers' ability to participate and persist, with the goal of simplifying barrier-removal supports to better respond to what families say they need most.

At the same time, SUDE is reimagining service delivery models. The team is exploring ways to infuse SUDE with whole-family and financial coaching and mentoring, which have been hallmarks of the successful, well-known FFD model. It is also designing how to track child outcomes alongside its work with fathers and noncustodial parents. By thoughtfully designing these strategies, the team is supporting economic stability for children to thrive no matter the structure of the family.

Throughout their work, the team has consistently demonstrated a commitment to listening to parents and centering their input into program direction and design. Through stakeholder meetings, interviews, and community surveys, the team has gathered input on engagement strategies, messaging, and programming that resonates with the parents and families in their communities. It continues to refine how SUDE and FFD fit together as a 2Gen ecosystem that works for fathers and noncustodial parents as well as mothers. As a result of Rising Futures Maine, StartUp Downeast is now led by the same formalized governance structure of five agencies that share leadership of Family Futures Downeast.

# Recommendations and Ideas for the Future

To build on Maine’s assets and the early successes of Rising Futures Maine, the state will need to make sustained, flexible investments that strengthen the local organizations that parents trust; stabilize families’ basic needs; and make longer-term education pathways truly accessible. Evidence from the impacts of Maine’s financial support programs and the Build HOPE initiative show that parents are most likely to succeed when they have dedicated navigators, predictable financial support, and programs designed around stackable credentials and family-sustaining jobs.

At the same time, impending cuts to the federal safety net threaten to deepen economic insecurity for thousands of families, raising the stakes for practitioners who support families, policymakers, and parents.

The recommendations that follow call for increased funding to community-based organizations, expanded financial supports for parents, more flexible postsecondary pathways, statewide data collection strategies to build a better understanding of the student-parent population, and stronger basic-needs protections so that families can thrive.



# 1.

## **Increased funding for CBOs to implement 2Gen strategies**

Rising Futures Maine’s partners are strong, trusted local organizations that are making meaningful differences in individual families’ lives. Their work illustrates the importance of local, relationship-based support that helps families navigate immediate hurdles and pursue longer-term goals. More evidence that speaks to the importance of relational support comes from the final Build HOPE report. Nearly 80% of Build HOPE survey respondents said that they had tried to access postsecondary programs without help and had been unsuccessful.<sup>21</sup> With assistance from navigators, families were able to enroll in programs, maintain benefits, resolve problems quickly, and persist toward educational completion.<sup>22</sup>

However, there are limits to program-level efforts when larger systemic barriers—such as a lack of child care or reliable transportation, limited living-wage jobs, and benefits cliffs—remain in place. Maine has done commendable work addressing these challenges through the creation of statewide assets and supportive anti-poverty policies, but more support is needed to continue progress and to sustain the CBOs that parents consistently identify as their most trusted anchors.

# 2.

## **Sufficient financial support for parents to achieve credentials with labor market value**

Data from the HOPE and CSSP impact reports show that among individuals who obtain an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, or other credentials, employment and earnings outcomes are greatest for bachelor’s degree holders. While there are still positive earnings and employment outcomes for individuals who complete certificate programs, associate’s and bachelor’s degree programs should remain viable options for parents. Parents have emphasized that predictable financial support that covers tuition, fees, and basic needs is essential if they are to choose pathways that align with their long-term goals rather than only what they can afford in the short term.

### 3.

#### **Flexible, stackable pathways that help parents build toward family-sustaining jobs**

The innovative model of the Harold Alfond Center for the Future of Maine's Workforce supports short-term training that leads to employment alongside stackable credentials that can support the longer-term pursuit of an associate's degree. Additionally, in an exciting development, the Maine Community College System's free college program was recently made permanent, but unfortunately, it still excludes adult learners.

More support is needed to enable parents to pursue longer-term education pathways. There is evidence that earning a degree leads to a higher income, but finding ways to support the full range of parents' career interests and goals—including those surfaced through parent advisory roles and listening sessions—is imperative to truly build toward a 2Gen approach that centers parent voice and whole-family well-being.

### 4.

#### **Improved student-parent data collection strategies**

While Maine has built a strong knowledge base from strategies that support student parents, the state can do more to understand who these student parents are, how they are accessing support, and which groups remain underserved. Stronger, more consistent student-parent data would education providers (in partnership with CBOs) sharpen the implementation of existing strategies and other 2Gen innovations, and help policymakers and practitioners assess whether systemwide education and workforce initiatives are effectively serving parenting students and in what ways. In addition, better information on who student parents are and where they're located could strengthen relationships between education providers and CBOs by enabling more targeted referrals from postsecondary institutions to human services organizations for family-centered services.

## 5.

### **Increased attention to bolstering families' basic needs, especially with looming federal policy shifts**

Due to the unraveling of the federal safety net, many families will need additional support to find economic stability, never mind pursue economic prosperity. Tens of thousands of Mainers risk losing the health care they access through Medicaid or food assistance they receive through SNAP, in the wake of the July 2024 passage of HR1, sometimes referred to as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 34,000 individuals could lose access to Medicaid and 19,000 could lose access to SNAP benefits when HR1's provisions go into effect.<sup>23</sup> Parents are already raising concerns about how these shifts will affect their ability to stay in school, remain employed, and care for their children.

In this context, the work of Rising Futures Maine and its partners becomes even more critical. Strengthening and scaling 2Gen, community-anchored strategies is only possible with sustainable funding that supports this family-centered work and keeps parent perspectives at the table. This investment, alongside continued policy advocacy; programs like HOPE and CSSP; barrier removal; and enhanced income support, child care subsidies, and tuition-free college, will be essential to ensuring that parents and their children can succeed in Maine's evolving economy.

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