



**APRIL 2021**

# **Cultivating Mattering For Maine Youth: Community Conversations**

**Safe Spaces & Small Acts**

**MAINE RESILIENCE  
BUILDING NETWORK**



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

# CULTIVATING MATTERING FOR MAINE YOUTH

## BUILDING A CULTURE FOR COMMUNITY RESILIENCE: SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

### Executive Summary

More than 40 percent of middle and high school students in Maine don't feel they matter in their communities. Given that Mattering is a protective factor for mental health issues and diseases of despair, that statistic is particularly alarming in a state that leads the nation in youth diagnosed with anxiety and where an increasing number of young people report considering suicide.

The Maine Resilience Building Network (MRBN) launched Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth in response to the data and research that builds a compelling case for the need for communities to ensure that young people feel seen, heard, and valued. A statewide series of Community Conversations identified strategies and approaches that support Mattering, which are summed up in this report under the themes of Safe Space and Small Acts.

- Safe Spaces
- Spaces created with, by, and for youth
- Designed for authentic engagement and youth contribution
- Considerations for LGBTQ and other marginalized youth
- Small Acts
- Systems can begin with small changes in language, norms
- Small acts of recognition and representation can have an impact
- Every community member has a role to play

For work in communities to be sustainable, policies and systems must be in place to support them. With this report, MRBN offers communities and policy makers a starting point to work together to ensure that Maine youth matter.

# ANALYSIS

The essence of Mattering is the belief that you are seen, heard, and valued by others. It's more than being included or fitting in – it's feeling that you are contributing in a meaningful way. Others depend on you. Your absence would have an impact. At home, at work, at school, and in your community.

Mattering is a protective factor, meaning it's associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes. Mattering researcher and psychologist Gordon Flett explains, "People who believe they matter to others have a key protective resource that can buffer them from life stressors and challenges throughout their lives." (*Appendix A*)

## Why Mattering Matters for Maine Youth

Mattering aligns with the Centers for Disease Control's guidance on connectedness as a protective factor for youth. "Youth who feel connected at school and home are less likely to experience negative health outcomes related to sexual risk, substance use, violence, and mental health." (CDC, 2020)

The Maine Resilience Building Network's Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth has its roots in a concerning data point: In the 2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS), which measures health-related behaviors and attitudes, 41 percent of middle school students and 43 percent high schoolers said they feel they don't matter to their community. (*Appendix B*) Without that sense of connectedness, young Mainers lack a key protective factor, putting them at increased risk of anxiety, depression, suicide, and other diseases of despair.

2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey		
Do you agree or disagree that in your community you feel like you matter to people?		
	<b>DISAGREE</b>	AGREE
High School students	<b>43%</b>	57%
Middle School students	<b>41%</b>	59%

Even before the isolation and disconnect caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, young Mainers were suffering. The 2019 MIYHS results show 20 percent of middle school students said they have seriously considered killing themselves; 8 percent say they have attempted suicide.

Sixteen percent of high school students said they had seriously considered suicide during the previous 12 months, while 9 percent reported attempting suicide.

2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (Middle School)		
	<b>YES</b>	NO
Have you ever seriously thought about killing yourself?	<b>20%</b>	80%
Have you ever tried to kill yourself?	<b>8%</b>	92%

2019 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (High School)		
	<b>YES</b>	NO
During the past 12 months, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide?	<b>16%</b>	84%
During the past 12 months, how many times did you actually attempt suicide?	<b>At least once 9%</b>	None 91%

# SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

According to the 2019 National Survey of Children’s Health, Maine has the nation’s highest rate of children with diagnosed anxiety disorders – a rate that increased from 16.1 percent in 2017 to 16.5 percent in 2019. The same survey shows Maine has the third highest rate of children with diagnosed depression. Youth who lack protective factors are also at higher risk for developing substance use disorders, which are taking a devastating toll in Maine.

## Community-Developed Solutions

While families are the primary connection points between youth and adults, they can’t do it alone. Communities, governments, civic organizations, and schools all have a role in developing policies and norms that support Youth Mattering. Taking an upstream approach to primary prevention, the Maine Resilience Building Network (MRBN) seeks to catalyze community-developed solutions to build resilience through protective factors such as positive relationships.

From January through March 2021, MRBN invited community members and organizations to join Community Conversations in Maine’s nine Public Health districts. (*Appendix C*) Nearly 500 people took part. The majority of them work directly with youth in nonprofit organizations, public health, public safety, and education. A facilitator guided them through a series of questions to get them thinking and talking about what is working in their communities, the needs they see, and opportunities to connect. (*Appendix D*)

Participants’ observations and insights serve as the foundation of this examination of the overarching themes that emerged: Safe Spaces and Small Acts.

## Safe Spaces

“If you want youth to participate, offer them safe, welcoming spaces that are designed for youth by youth.”

That single sentiment echoed across all nine Community Conversations. It’s important to note that in this context, “space” refers not just to physical locations, but also to circumstances or processes where authentic engagement is the desired outcome.

*“How do we involve young people in the planning and creation of space, not just invite them in once space is created?”*

*“As adults, we’ve been taught that we’re supposed to tell them what to do. But when we can create containers that really allow them to make choices and to step into a place of power, to be able to actually affect some kind of impact, it’s just astounding what can happen.”*

## SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

The challenge is to find both the will and the way to do that in a world that is generally designed for and by adults. Several participants suggested viewing the challenge of youth engagement through the lens of “adult privilege” or “adulthood.”

*“So many programs are focused on improving the lives of youth but we’re not really asking them how they want to be engaged in our community. I asked a couple of young adults why they’re not more engaged and their response was, I don’t really want to be engaged because the community is so focused on adults. It’s not my community. It’s your community.”*

*“Adulthood is real. I’m sure that all of you have seen it in action. Let’s get a token youth on the board. And they know they’re tokens. And that’s one of the reasons it never works. And also, they’re really not that interested in that kind of boring board work that we adults engage in a lot. At the same time, they do want a voice and a choice in organizations that they feel passionate about.”*

*“We want youth voices, but we expect them to operate based on our approach to the world. We want them to sit in conference rooms, we want them to attend meetings, we want them to share their very personal stories to educate us in very public forums.”*

Service providers who work directly with youth say one key to increasing engagement is to offer choices about how they will participate and how they will communicate. Alternative means of expression, particularly through visual and creative arts, were cited as successful approaches across the state.

One of the best ways to figure out what will work for adolescents is to ask them before adults have made foundational decisions, while acknowledging that shifting from a “power over” to a “power with” framework can be challenging for everyone involved.

*“What matters to them? What do they care about? Adults have tons of great ideas about what would be good for youth, but it doesn’t really mean anything if it’s not coming from the youth perspective.”*

*“It really is about finding different ways to engage with our youth so we can find out what they would like and what their comfort zone is. We have this youth and cultural center that we developed...the youth were the ones who provided the input to our grant writer and contractors about the things that they wanted so we incorporated those things to make it theirs and they use it.”*

*“Be clear what their role is. Be clear what you are asking. Do they have decision making power? Why are you including them?”*

## SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

*“Putting a student on your committee so you can check a box on your list doesn’t work.”*

*“I try to really be respectful and ask before I just make plans for where they are so that the spaces that we have are really something that they have control over.”*

By definition, youth in marginalized populations — including those who are LGBTQ+, Black, Brown, indigenous, involved with the justice system, experiencing homelessness, or living with disabilities — tend to have a harder time finding spaces where they feel safe and welcome.

According to the 2019 MIYHS data, nearly 14% of Maine high school students identify as LGBT. Sixty-three percent feel they don’t matter to their communities. Given those numbers, a portion of each conversation was dedicated to a deeper discussion of how to increase Mattering for these youth. Language, symbols, and representation are seen as cornerstones to building relationships.

*“A rainbow sticker or pin tells a kid that there’s somebody safe. They may not say anything, but they will see it and it will matter to them.”*

*“I fly a rainbow flag in my front yard. That is a symbol of a safe place.”*

*“I make myself visible in my community. I am very clearly queer to most people. And that can be huge because representation matters. It matters seeing an adult queer person in the world being successful.”*

*“It’s important to put ourselves out there as advocates and have them see us do that. I think it’s important even if it makes you uncomfortable. It’s important to have them see that you’re willing to stand up for them. I tell kids I have big shoulders. I can take that for you.”*

*“Even if we don’t understand it or it’s difficult, if a person chooses to change their name, honor it.”*

*“If we mess up with pronouns or names, they really appreciate it if we just say that. Just to acknowledge that we’re human and we’re trying really makes a difference.”*

There was widespread acknowledgement that admitting a lack of understanding or knowledge can be difficult for adults who are used to being “in charge.” To effectively engage youth, adults may need support in navigating new relationship paradigms.

*“The change has to start at the adult level. Why are we uncomfortable thinking about students having ownership in that decision-making process?”*

*“It’s okay to not know and it’s okay to not understand and it’s okay to want to learn.”*

## SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

*“When we think about engaging young people, let it not be from our adult model of sitting around a conference table making decisions.”*

*“To actively engage youth in advisory and board level positions, adults need as much training and unlearning as youth. Create shared ownership of how we need to learn to work together, not youth needing indoctrinating into adult practices.”*

Young people regularly interact with adults in business settings as employees or customers. In many cases, businesses serve as gathering places for youth. Businesses are seen as partners in Youth Mattering work, from mentorship opportunities to everyday encounters.

*“The couple that runs the general store in my town could teach a class in Youth Mattering. They know the kids’ names, say hello when they enter the store, and joke with them in ways that allow the kids to feel seen and not treated differently because they’re kids.”*

*“I’ve been wondering for a while how we frame resilience building and concerns around childhood trauma as an economic development issue and getting businesses to appreciate that doing more to support local youth is a long-term investment. It’s investing in, perhaps, the workforce of their future.”*

*“When a youth expresses an interest in a field, we connect them with someone local. This makes them feel they matter in two ways — a professional is taking the time to talk with them about their future, and they know there could be a place for them in the community when they get older.”*

The COVID-19 pandemic created new obstacles for connecting youth and adults. Some programs found themselves cut off from their adult volunteers and turned to youth for help adapting to the change.

*“Our hand was forced a little bit and it has been one of the best things to happen. They really have embraced it and they are getting so much more out of it. If there’s any hesitancy about whether you can step away from some of the more traditional staff roles, I would encourage you to give it a shot because it’s pretty extraordinary.”*

*“Students stepped up and they had tons of ideas. They helped us with radio ads and our social media presence. To see them take that on and be so proud of what they’re doing — they were just thrilled with themselves.”*

# SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

## Small Acts

“When you go into a grocery store or pass someone on the sidewalk, you can engage them meaningfully and it’s empowering for the person engaging and the person receiving that energy.”

We asked participants to consider Youth Mattering from different perspectives — to “take off their professional hats,” so to speak, and consider the role that small acts can play in making young people feel seen, heard, and valued.

*“When I go to the grocery store, I have conversations with the young people that are the clerks and the baggers. They are wonderful conversations. I always get the same reaction which is they are so happy to have somebody chatting with them, calling them by their name.”*

*“A smile and a hello goes a long way even when a teenager doesn’t seem to acknowledge our existence.” “Say thank you. It doesn’t have to be a big deal, just thank kids for the ordinary things they might not get acknowledged for.”*

At a system level, organizations can show youth they matter in small but very tangible ways.

*“We pay them for their time. If we are asking them to use their expertise to plan a program or an event, we pay them.”*

*“Introduce yourself with your pronouns. It’s very important for cisgender people to get into the habit of doing this, to normalize it. A cis person introducing themselves with their pronouns creates opening for queer people to be able to offer up their pronouns.”*

*“Look at the signs in your workplace. The forms you are using. Your email signature. These are all places where small changes can let LGBTQ kids know they are seen and welcome.”*

The value of bringing youth and elders together was raised in different ways in nearly every Community Conversation. Members of Wabanaki communities expressed appreciation for the cultural history of intergenerational learning and concern that the tradition might be in jeopardy as it becomes harder for the generations to interact, in part due to COVID.



## SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

*“When I was a kid, when you walked around a native community, there was ash pounding here; I watched carving down the street. There was all kinds of stuff and I would just pop around and just sit there and watch them. And the conversations you have in these informal settings was amazing.”*

*“I really think if the youth had the chance to sit down and listen to some of these stories, and the elders are willing to share these stories — it makes you think about how your life is and how we are as a community.”*

*“They want to share their stories and the youth is willing to listen. They just need that platform. And food! Youth and elder meals.”*

### Moving From Dialogue to Action

The energy and enthusiasm generated by this series of Community Conversations was immediately apparent, as participants began taking concrete steps to increase Youth Mattering in their communities and organizations.

*“We are reviewing the LBGTQ Best Practices for Inclusion guide from OUT Maine, to see how we can improve our programs for this significant segment of our community. I was unaware of OUT Maine before the Mattering series.”*

Organizations who were unknown to each other before the Community Conversations have now connected and are looking for ways to overcome the challenges of distance and geography to work together.

*“We have had so many rich conversations because of this series. I’m sure collaborations will come out of it.”*

Individuals are looking at challenges through a Youth Mattering lens.

*“Maybe I should give them their choice. The kids have to have their input. I hadn’t thought about it that way before. Maybe we were going about it the wrong way.”*

*“I’m more aware as I’m going about my day. Realizing that smiling at a teenager behind my mask doesn’t accomplish anything. I have to make the effort to speak to them.”*

### Next Steps for Communities

To address Mattering at the local level, it is crucial for communities to bring youth into the conversation, with particular attention paid to marginalized and disengaged youth. Youth-serving and youth-led organizations can provide process guidance and engagement expertise. It is worth considering supports for building intergenerational communication and collaboration skills before broadening the conversation.

## SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

Communities can work with youth to assess the local environment. Are there systemic barriers keeping young people from fully engaging in their community? Do community institutions use restorative practices? Are public spaces welcoming for youth?

While MRBN is prepared to provide supports including trauma-informed, resilience-responsive education to impact practice and systems policy change, it's up to communities to determine how best to prioritize and address Youth Mattering. The key is to keep talking, build connections, and examine policies and systems with a willingness to overhaul them as needed.

By sharing this report and engaging community members and sectors that were not part of the initial conversations (faith-based organizations, civic leaders, local businesses), communities can continue to break down silos and dispel any notion that one program can provide all the answers.

### Next Steps for MRBN

The first phase of Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth focused on: raising awareness about the importance of Mattering as a protective factor; educating engaged adults about the science of Mattering; and gathering input from thought leaders, youth-supporting organizations, and communities about effective youth engagement practices and the potential for improvement across the state.

In the next phase, MRBN is collaborating with youth, Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness and other organizations that support marginalized youth, and communication and evaluation consultants in developing a Youth Mattering Strategic Plan. Resources including communication guidance and toolkits will be developed and shared with communities to further support their work.

### Conclusion

To truly elevate Youth Mattering, communities, governments, schools, businesses, and organizations must commit to change systems and policies to create environments where youth can thrive. The Maine Resilience Building Network is making a long-term commitment to this through Cultivating Mattering for Maine Youth.

By working to create safe spaces and engaging in small acts of connection, every person in every community can have a positive impact on the youth around them. But small acts alone are not enough. This requires addressing explicit and implicit biases as well as systemic challenges such as homelessness, lack of access to transportation, and inequity of resources.

## SAFE SPACES & SMALL ACTS

With this report, MRBN offers communities and policy makers a starting point to shift systems and our culture. Across our communities, we must invest in primary prevention strategies that improve the health and well-being of our youth. These investments are not just monetary. Individuals, organizations and systems must invest time, energy, and caring into ensuring that every youth in Maine understands how much they matter to their community.

“When you go into a grocery store or pass someone on the sidewalk, you can engage them meaningfully and it’s empowering for the person engaging and the person receiving that energy.”

# APPENDIX A

## MRBN Resources