

IMPACT REPORT



T · R · E · E ·

Transforming Rural Experience in Education[®]

A hopeful approach to healthier, more equitable rural schools.



10 Commissary Point Rd, Trescott ME 04652
www.theccclc.org • 207-733-2233

TREE: Building Resilience in Rural Schools and Communities

Dear friends of TREE:

Imagine transforming schools into places of learning and healing for students and teachers alike. Imagine changes that lead to significant gains in students' engagement and trust in their school experience, and notable increases in teachers' commitment to supporting the learning of all students—especially those who have experienced stress, adversity, and trauma in their young lives.

These promising results are real. They are among the initial findings after just over one year of implementing the TREE program in under-resourced, rural schools and communities in Maine.

TREE: Transforming Rural Experience in Education[®] is a four-year pilot program of Cobscook Community Learning Center (CCLC) in Downeast Maine. CCLC's mission is to create responsive educational opportunities that strengthen personal, community, and global well-being.

TREE begins by meeting children's basic needs, supporting their intellectual curiosity, and expanding mental health supports for students and their families. The TREE approach is trauma-informed, whole-child, student-empowered, and equity-centered, ensuring that all students and families have access to the same resources and opportunities. It promotes social, emotional, and academic development, and seeks to improve instruction and leadership by providing training, coaching, and support to teachers and administrators.

Launched in January 2018 in two elementary schools in Washington County, Maine, TREE operates as a Research Practice Partnership (RPP), comprised of research faculty from University of Maine and Colby College as well as CCLC's dedicated TREE educators.

The work of the RPP team follows a rapid-prototyping approach, grounded in the core values of trauma-informed systems change. We develop and implement strategies, use the best data we have to evaluate how these strategies are working, and make changes, if necessary, to maximize impact and success.

By calling on the strengths, knowledge, and creative problem-solving potential of grassroots relationships to support student success, TREE is developing an adaptable model that can benefit rural schools around the country, creating **deep and lasting change in teaching and learning for all children.**

Systems change takes time. But already, in a little over a year, the results for schools and children are striking. This impact report reflects the authentic voices of the diverse people involved in this transformative effort—teachers, students, mental health therapists, administrators, and community partners. Their dedication, openness to change, and commitment to building a better future for all children are core to the TREE experience.

With gratitude,

The TREE RPP Team

Brittany Ray, M.Ed., TREE Director

Ashley Cirone, M.Ed., Resource Coach, Portside Elementary

Laura Thomas, B.S., Resource Coach, Seabrook Elementary

Catharine Biddle, Ph. D. Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership, University of Maine

Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed. D., Professor of Education, Colby College

Mark Tappan, Ed. D., Professor of Education, Colby College

TREE's Core Assumptions

1. Chronic adversity, stress, and trauma are not just individual mental health issues for which families are solely responsible. These are also systemic conditions disproportionately affecting certain populations and geographic areas.
2. Student success and community vitality in challenged regions are best restored through thoughtful, informed, and committed action on the part of all members of a rural community in partnership with students, teachers, and families.
3. A genuinely trauma-informed culture is best achieved through engaging youth as full and active partners in school and community transformation.

TREE at-a-glance

(Note: names of schools have been changed to protect students' identity)

Seabrook Elementary

127 Students
27% Special Education
13% Kinship/Foster care
68% Free & Reduced Lunch
68% White
32% Latinx
19% Dual Language Learners

Portside Elementary

111 Students
14% Special Education
8% Kinship/Foster care
55% Free & Reduced Lunch
98% White

**3,754 people in Maine, California, Washington DC,
and Colorado have attended TREE Professional
Development programs and trainings**

TREE: A Solution for Rural America

Washington County, one of the two most rural counties in Maine, faces the highest rates of poverty in the state. As in so many rural areas of the US, substance use disorder and access to mental health care are among residents' chief concerns.

The northern part of the county is home to two Passamaquoddy reservations, with challenges reflected in an average life expectancy of 50 years—27 years below the state average. The southern part of the county is home to a growing Latinx population, initially drawn to the area through migrant work related to blueberry harvesting.

Cobscook Community Learning Center (CCLC) was established in 1999, to leverage the best educational practices and programs we could identify or design to bring improvements to easternmost Maine. In 2012, CCLC co-founder and director, Alan Furth, was introduced to Dr. Pamela Cantor, founder of Turnaround for Children (TFC). In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Dr. Cantor developed a program to address the impact of trauma on NYC public school students.

After an inspiring meeting with the TFC team in New York, CCLC assembled a team of rural education, mental health, and community leaders to work on creating a model of whole-systems change to serve rural communities. In 2015, CCLC hired a project director, Brittany Ray. Her task was to give shape to the vision that had emerged out of the two years of cross-sector conversations among stakeholders. The TREE Research Practice Partnership between Colby College, the University of Maine, and CCLC was formed, and its members embarked on a series of county-wide community listening sessions to more broadly inform the design of a model. The work of the RPP evolved over several phases, which included:

- 1) Listening sessions around rural Washington County that brought together 300 parents, teachers, and students to talk about the resources and services community members want and need to address childhood adversity, trauma, and poverty as experienced by the community.
- 2) A six-month design process that included a national search of best practices, review of the literature, data analysis of the community listening sessions, and ultimately a collaboratively designed model of practice.
- 3) A half-year initial pilot incorporating regular developmental evaluation of the program.
- 4) A fully implemented model of trauma-informed practice in two schools.
- 5) Statewide professional development outreach to educators on issues of childhood trauma, laying the groundwork to scale TREE to other communities.

The TREE Research Practice Partnership emerged from rural resourcefulness, to offer a uniquely effective response—long-term, hands-on, deeply engaged—to the challenges of rurality. This grassroots collaboration continues to develop and grow.



Teacher Profile • Suzen Polk-Hoffses

“We’re working with the future.”

Suzen, a pre-K teacher at Seabrook Elementary, is no stranger to poverty and trauma. She was raised in public housing projects in San Francisco, and education was her lifeboat. She credits a few key teachers with showing her the potential her life held.

When she became a teacher herself some 20 years ago, her first classroom was in rural Maine, about as far as she could get from inner-city San Francisco, but she immediately recognized the familiar signs of trauma in her students. She assumed that everyone else knew these signs too, because it seemed so obvious. But to her surprise, she found that many of her coworkers had little knowledge of the ways in which trauma affected the learning readiness of their students.

“I always felt I was on my own path. I kept thinking, ‘Aren’t you coming along?’ Before TREE, people would just pile blame on the parents—‘they’re just lazy.’ They weren’t understanding, boy, it really is hard if you’re dealing with trauma.”

Suzen has seen a sea change at Seabrook since the TREE program began in January, 2018. “TREE opened up peoples’ minds to how trauma impacts a child. It is giving teachers that vocabulary, that knowledge. We need to talk about it. It’s not hopeless. There is hope. We just have to understand how to meet these children and especially their families. Teachers have their biases. We need to understand that parent isn’t lazy; this is how that parent is coping.”

Since TREE, she says, more people realize that it’s ok to be kind to parents who are struggling, and listen to their stories. TREE training has helped teachers to take a moment and consider how they can help. And this has made Suzen’s work more satisfying as well. **“I feel that we’re now speaking the same language, as a group. I don’t feel so isolated.”**

Recently, a Seabrook teacher discovered that one of her students was living in a tent with her family. Prior to TREE, Suzen recounts, there would have been a lot of judgment of the parents in this situation—and the teacher would have seen no option other than contacting child protective services. Instead, she spoke to the other faculty and asked for advice. They discussed the situation with the TREE resource coach, Laura Thomas. Laura was able to reach out to the family and help connect them with supportive services. Together, they navigated what in the past would have been a painfully isolating situation for all involved.

Reflecting on her own start in life, Suzen says of TREE, “The money spent on this program truly will pay dividends. We need to make sure these children have the best chance of succeeding. We want to make sure those barriers aren’t impeding their success. I just look at myself and I look at my brother. I made it and my brother unfortunately didn’t. We have to keep trying.”



Suzen Polk-Hoffses greets her pre-K students at Seabrook

“We need to make sure every child has a level playing field. We’re planting seeds. We’re working with the future.”

Teacher Interview • Allison Beal

“I take listening to a new level now.”

“TREE has opened up a whole new avenue to working with my difficult and not so difficult kids as well, providing resources, coaching, and therapy. This allows me to be more relaxed, so when I go home at night the struggle isn’t isolated within myself. It’s allowed me to be a better teacher because I don’t bear the weight alone.

“Before I would go home and look up strategies on Google, but I really had no clue what to do with my challenging kids. Now I have the resilience coach and the therapist I can go to for a sounding board, someone who says ‘I hear you, here’s something you can try;’ someone reminding me ‘You’re doing a great job,’ so I don’t feel so isolated.”

“Having that resource at my fingertips and ready to go, affords me the time to spend with my students. When students are having a rough time, I don’t worry about losing speed. I know if I invest four or five minutes right now, I’ll get more on the other end.”

“I take listening to a new level now. When I hear a student asking or wondering about something, I try to find a way to integrate that so it’s more meaningful for the kids. I watch how they’re playing and see what the kids are absorbing, what they’re learning. I notice kids making statements about their feelings more often. I notice them working things out for themselves. I have students voicing, ‘I’m really sad right now.’ Kids will go get the color-coded bracelets. They’ll use cues and self-regulate on their own, still knowing they need help. We’re seeing the progress in the empowerment of the kids feeling heard and understanding that they’re of value.

“I have a kiddo who was exposed to a traumatic situation and has high anxiety. He has moments where he goes completely inward. Now I know that it’s hard for him to talk, and if I start slow and take the time, he’ll move to a better spot where he can tell me everything.

“Sometimes I use Serita [the school’s TREE therapist] even for my own mental state. She has wonderful breathing techniques. I check in with her regularly and we talk about how things are going with particular students.

“Two of TREE’s trainings have been especially important to me: the Moving Stories [with Sue Carroll Duffy], and a retreat in New Hampshire with Emily Daniels. Emily really reminded me that if I don’t take time to self-care, then I can’t be there for my kids. That’s a huge takeaway. I’m not one to ask for help—I will struggle through until I get to the end—so it’s big a mind shift for me, seeking out assistance.

“I’ve been teaching for 19 years, and TREE is definitely by far the most effective professional development I’ve had. I’ve always been a teacher that tries to figure out the function of students’ behavior—there’s something they’re trying to tell me. I’ve never been punitive. So having TREE help me dig deeper and understand why we do this—it’s so fulfilling to me, I feel like I’m a better teacher. I feel more connected with my kids and with my co-worker. We’ve done a lot of co-teaching, but this has been one step in that whole-child direction that we’ve really been craving. It’s brought us closer even on an emotional level. We can rely on each other.”



Allison Beal with her K-1st graders at Portside. All students enjoy a variety of seating choices thanks to TREE.

“If TREE were to leave our school, I would have to follow wherever they moved to (if there was an opening). I don’t think I would want to work in a school that doesn’t have TREE!”

Teacher Profile • Cristina Perez

“Everyone is having so much fun while learning.”

Cristina has a special perspective on TREE and its impact. She arrived from Mexico with no English when she was in 4th grade, and attended Seabrook Elementary. “There were not that many Latinx community members here then,” she recalls, “and no teachers that represented my culture, so making the connection was hard.”

Cristina is in her second year as an ESL teacher, working with kids in grades K-12. She has seen a big positive impact with TREE at Seabrook, especially in the school experience for families with limited English.

When TREE conducted school climate surveys for parents and students in both English and Spanish, it was the first time Latinx families had been asked about their desires and concerns for their children’s education. They were able to share what they liked, and their thoughts on how we can make things better. This made a big impression on families, and Cristina reports she is now seeing more of them attending school events and giving voice to their hopes and ideas. “All this has been facilitated by TREE and how they focus on making the environment better, helping everyone feel more welcome and giving everyone a voice,” she says.

Helping to build the school-community relationship has been personally really rewarding for Cristina. “I had a student in the survey who mentioned they would like to see their culture and language around the school, so that’s something that we’ve been working on with TREE’s help—hanging posters with famous people from El Salvador, etc. Some of the parents said they wanted to see their language and culture in the library books and TREE has been helping with this too.”

Cristina is also enthusiastic about TREE’s Somedays program (see textbox, page 10), as well as the partnership with Maine Outdoor School. “Kids really enjoy the outdoors, experimenting outside, and learning about science. They love Somedays too—they can feel how they’re important and a special part of the school community. For kids who don’t have that support environment at home, being recognized like that is really meaningful. With all these things TREE has brought to Seabrook—microadventures, Maine Outdoor School, Somedays—you can see everyone is having so much fun while learning.”

As a new teacher, TREE has been a huge support. “Being able to understand more about the life of the kids, I’m less stressed about getting things done and more concerned with showing kids we care about them.”

“My view about school in general has changed a lot. TREE has provided so many great trainings about trauma which they never provided in college. This has changed my teaching. Kids go through a lot of hard stuff, and it doesn’t mean they don’t want to be good, it means they’re doing their best with a difficult situation.”



ESL Teacher Cristina Perez attended elementary school at Seabrook

“My first year as a teacher I felt very stressed about time. Now that I understand more about trauma, I see that numbers aren’t everything. Sometimes, just like with us, things happen at home for the kids that influence how they feel and behave, and that’s normal. Understanding this has made my relationship with my students stronger.”

Teacher Interview • Jeanna Carver

“My eyes are opened.”

“TREE came at perfect time. I had an extremely challenging class. One boy in particular had needs I couldn't meet. He was coming to school and he hadn't eaten and had no heat in the dead of winter. He wasn't thinking about his ABCs—he was in survival mode. TREE and Ashley Cirone [Portside Resource Coach] came on, and they pretty much saved me. Ashley knew so much more about resources to help this little boy. She was able to take the family to the food pantry and connect them with resources for heating assistance, so my little boy had heat and snacks and was coming to school fed. That made a huge difference for this kid, and for me.”

“I've taught for 10 years. Teachers are expected to wear so many hats, I was just doing the best I could. It's taken a lot of pressure off me. It's given me space to breathe and resources to pull from.”

“Our school is bare bones; there's nobody extra. Before TREE, the mental health resources in our school were pretty minimal. It was triage, pretty much; only the most extreme cases were receiving help. Having Serita [Corey-Childs, Portside mental health therapist] right in the school two days a week has been wonderful. For myself too, there are times that I have to see Serita. I definitely use her. She's been able to come to staff meetings and show us exercises, like breathing exercises we can share with our students when they're feeling stress and anxiety. She comes into my classroom to do check-ins with me and see how things are going.

“In the past, I was a little naïve about the circumstances of some of my students. TREE has shed a lot of light onto families for me. My eyes are really opened. The drug epidemic is hitting our community hard. Kids living with grandparents, grandparents doing the best they can to get by. It's hard for everybody. It's such a small community. TREE is giving me tools to help. It makes me feel hopeful. We're making a change.”

“The food pantry in our school has been a wonderful resource. I'm able to send snacks home in students' backpacks. Ashley is great about making up a box and delivering it to make sure students have what they need. She's amazing.

“It helps, because we live in a very proud community. Families feel more comfortable with Ashley; they view her as safer and they're able to talk with her. I wouldn't have a family coming to me and saying, ‘My electricity is turned off and I can't cook for my child.’ But they'll do that with Ashley.

“Learning from Ashley and Brittany about trauma-informed practices has made a huge impact. I have one kiddo who doesn't have a lot of words, and traditionally when he got upset, he would just crawl under a desk. Now he goes to the sensory corner and it calms him down. Now I know he's not *giving* me a hard time, he's *having* a hard time. That takes a lot of pressure off me—it's not ME. I deal differently with behaviors in my classroom. I've tried to fully embrace trauma-informed practices. I'm giving out a lot more hugs than I used to.”



Jeanna Carver with her pre-K students at Portside

Mental Health Therapist Profile • Dr. Sue Carroll Duffy

“TREE creates safe and encouraging places to grow.”

Sue worked for TREE as a mental health therapist in 2018-2019 and as a psychologist with the Passamaquoddy tribe in Maine, providing outpatient therapy, assessments and school consultation. She developed the Moving Stories Method, a hands-on and playful storytelling method used by TREE for social emotional learning in classrooms.

Sue loves TREE because it builds trust between families and the school and between families and mental health services. Those who may have had negative past experiences with therapy are more willing to try it again with the encouragement of school staff. Likewise, mental health therapists act as a bridge between families and teachers/administrators. In this way, long-seated tensions between families and the school can be resolved.

“Trust is earned with families by meeting basic needs. Families feel gratitude for the way TREE reaches out to them. This outreach opens the door to other services that they would not otherwise use,” Sue says.



Dr. Sue Carroll Duffy developed the popular Moving Stories method of play therapy used in TREE schools

Even for families with health insurance, high co-pays are often a barrier to receiving mental health treatment. In addition, sometimes the help a child needs is not billable to insurance. TREE offers flexibility so all children can be seen.

As a result of her work with TREE, Sue wants to do a better job caring for families in her own community. “I came home every day more conscious of the things I have. I’m thinking more about ways to support my neighbors with needs. There are more systemic interventions we could be doing as a community, even beyond TREE, through town government and churches.”

Her experience with TREE is changing how she works. She’s more focused on recognizing and breaking down barriers to care so that those families who need it most are getting to her. And with TREE support, she has been able to take steps to assess and research her work with Moving Stories as a tool for classroom social emotional learning and student voice.

“I feel proud of my relationship with TREE and proud of what TREE does. TREE creates safe and encouraging places to grow—for students, schools, and for me as a mental health provider.”



Mental Health Therapist Profile • Serita Corey-Childs

“TREE has smoothed the way in so many ways.”

Serita, mental health therapist at Portside Elementary, finds that the children she is seeing through TREE are not ones she would see in her private practice. The largest group are kids who have experienced early neglect, trauma, significant loss, substance abuse, domestic abuse—circumstances that present multiple barriers to care.

In a single classroom during TREE’s first year at Portside, five of the twelve students had lost their mothers. Serita was able to talk to the teachers and help them understand when one of their kids was having a rough day, “just reminding and encouraging staff in a whole other way of thinking—the kids aren’t being difficult, they just can’t stand another minute of dealing with what they’re dealing with.”

Because Portside is a small, tight-knit community, when children lose one or both parents, a relative—often a grandparent—will step in to raise them. But, as Serita points out, those relatives are grieving, too and things can get pretty intense. “The wonderful thing about TREE is, I can have not only the kids, but also the caregivers come down to my office to talk about what they’re struggling with. TREE is making all this possible.”

“I would just like to say thank you,” Serita concludes. “TREE has smoothed the way in so many ways. I’m a huge fan.”

“The concept is absolutely right. Teachers are front line people—TREE provides support and education for them and a chance to take a breath because they’re on deck all day long. TREE is a way to reach kids. I think it’s a great program.”



During mental health therapist Serita Corey-Child’s first year with TREE, she worked with a class of twelve students, five of whom had recently lost their mothers

What’s a Someday? What’s a microadventure?

In outdoor education vernacular, microadventures are small, low-cost, easy-to-run expeditions focused on getting students outside, regardless of socioeconomic class, location, skills, and ability. TREE brings microadventures into schools, and helps teachers integrate them into the classroom curriculum and align them with learning goals.

“Somedays” are another TREE initiative designed to introduce teachers to the connection between student voice and student engagement (Preble & Gordon, 2011). At the beginning of the school year, every child and teacher completes the sentence: “Someday I would like to . . .,” indicating one activity they hope to experience at school before the next summer.

Someday microadventures have become opportunities for student-initiated learning in TREE schools. With the support of the resilience coach, teachers hand over the curriculum to the children, creating microadventures based on students’ expressed desire to get outdoors and experience their classrooms and school grounds as a living, moving learning environment.

For more on Somedays and microadventures, see “Student Empowered Curricular Change,” an article in *Phi Delta Kappan* by Colby College education professor and TREE Research Practice Partnership member Lyn Mikel Brown and Colby student Jenny Flaumenhaft.

Mental Health Therapist Profile • Kandi Robertson

“Mental health care is just part of what we do, like going to the doctor. It’s normal.”

Kandi, the mental health therapist at Seabrook Elementary, has lived in Washington County since she was a teenager, and offered counseling through her private practice for many years. In her work with TREE, she says, she can see progress not just in her own clients but in the whole school environment.

“I adore my work with TREE. ADORE. The primary impact on me is seeing the positive work and change that can happen quickly with collaboration. You’re able to impact the whole system. I can work with my clients individually and then walk directly into the classroom and have time with the teacher, to process what’s working and what isn’t and make adjustments. That can happen rapidly, so it’s very rewarding and fulfilling.

“I also have the ability to work with parents, but what’s different is I can have parents come into sessions in the school and have that impact the whole environment, from the principal to the teacher to additional staff who are working with that child.

“When I am in private practice and I consult with schools, there’s this feeling of ‘Oh, the therapist is calling; who’s in trouble now?’ When I’m part of the school and teachers know who I am and I’ve built a rapport, we can just have a conversation without this idea that I’m the expert coming in with all this knowledge.”

Integrating therapy into the school environment, Kandi adds, helps kids realize that mental health care “is just part of what we do, like going to the doctor. It’s normal.”

“It’s important to be playful. We have a sparkle party when we finish working together; teachers can come if the kids want them to. We talk about what’s gone well, what we’re celebrating, and we throw glitter around.”

“Students love Maizie. The work is so rich. They love to help her. She slips a lot on the hallway. They see her walking tentatively and they say, ‘I think she might be scared, should we just pull on her?’ ‘No don’t pull on her when she’s scared!’ ‘What if we walk beside her?’ They’re talking about Maizie, but really, they’re talking about themselves. They’re learning to notice their own emotions and feel empathy.

“Maizie has helped a lot with some students who have an abuse history and have needed to learn how to protect themselves, so they practice saying ‘No’ or ‘Sit.’ We talk about the kind of voice they need to use and how they can’t be soft spoken. She also helps with regulation, attachment, and connection. I had one boy who was full of grief about a number of things including the loss of his own dog, so at first it was very painful for him to see Maizie because it brought up so much loss, so we talked about his connection with Maizie and how big his heart could be and how much it could hold.”

Kandi Robertson with her therapy dog Maizie and a student.



Kids love working with the mental health therapists at all the TREE schools. When they see them in the hallway, they shout, “When am I seeing you, when’s my appointment today?” There’s no shame whatsoever.

Student Profile • Ashley, Alex, and Floriberto

Three upper grade Seabrook students reflect at the end of the school year on what they like about TREE.

Ashley: From trust to hope to leadership

“What I like about Somedays is you can trust that it will come true, and you get a chance to really get to know the teachers. Because, let’s say you don’t really like a teacher and you don’t really trust them, and then they make your Someday come true—and it’s like, ‘I can sort of trust these people.’ Also you get to know them a little bit better, and what they like.

“Another thing that I really like about the Somedays is that it gives little kids hope that they can do whatever they want when they get older, and they can make other people’s dreams come true, too. Like, I want to learn how to speak Spanish, because there’s this kid in my class who doesn’t know how to speak English that well yet, and I want to be able to talk to him and just chat and say hi! I know a couple words but it’s not really that good. I feel like it would be a great goal for me to achieve because I could talk to him, and I’d be able to talk to other people and it would be cool because it would be my second language.

“We work a lot with TREE on leadership, and leadership is really important to me. The most important thing about doing leadership to me is having the little kids look up to you and think of you as a role model. Whatever you do, they want to do too. So if you’re not a really good role model, they’re going to do all the bad things. You have to be really careful what you’re doing and teach them the right stuff; that way they can be role models when they get older.”

Floriberto: Exploring the wilderness

“My favorite thing about TREE and Maine Outdoor School (MOS) is going outside and exploring the wilderness and learning about all new stuff and looking at it, touching it and feeling it. It’s important for MOS to be here at [Seabrook] because if you stay inside the whole entire time every day and don’t go outside and explore anything, or don’t do any experiments, or do anything challenging, we’ll get bored of doing the same thing over and over again every single day and then we won’t like to do that anymore.”



Alex: You’re warm and having fun

“It’s good to have TREE and MOS because they kinda work together, because sometimes you bring clothes and you don’t know it’s going to get colder over the day, so TREE is there to support MOS, and you have extra layers so you stay warm. So you’re warm and you’re having fun and learning outside.”

Parent Profile • Stephanie, Seabrook Foster Parent

“They’re going to work with you to help kids where they are.”

Stephanie and her husband became foster parents for the first time in early 2019. With two biological children in their teens, they decided it was time to pursue a longtime dream of opening their home and hearts to children through fostering.

During trainings, Stephanie and her husband learned that there are so many children between the ages of 7-13 in need of homes in Maine that some are being housed in hotels, with case workers taking shifts to care for them. They signed up then and there to provide therapeutic fostering for children who have experienced significant trauma.

Being educated about trauma has helped Stephanie be a better parent to her three foster children, (ages 13, 12, and 7).

“My kids had a lot of stuff happen. I have learned so much from them. I have realized that I must parent these children differently from my biological children because the trauma they have experienced makes them think differently and that means I must respond differently.”

“I know that my reaction and ability to stay calm and teach the right ways of handling situations is what is important.”

All three of Stephanie’s foster children are adjusting well and enjoying school, with the help of TREE supports, including on-site mental health therapy.

“When my children came to us at the beginning of the year, they didn’t want to go to school. They were scared of teachers, they were scared of making friends, and they thought the world was out to get them. Slowly as they experienced Seabrook, they realized it was a fun place. It was safe. They looked forward to their Somedays and they looked forward to seeing Maizie. And now they want to go to school. They made friends, they like their teachers, and they want to do well. They all went from failing to honors, which is pretty amazing.

“Seabrook has always been a homey school, but it feels more...it’s more electrified, everybody’s excited and everybody feels happy to be there. Not that they didn’t before, but it’s more noticeable now. [TREE] makes a difference in the morale. And the teachers look more relaxed.”

Stephanie and her husband have attended many trainings statewide, and they always come home feeling grateful for TREE. “I hear other foster parents who complain about how the school just doesn’t get it, and they feel like they’re fighting a losing battle. So I feel lucky. With TREE I know it’s not all going to be punishment and going to the principal’s office; they’re going to work with you to find a way to help kids where they are.



Stephanie in a shadow selfie with her foster children

“It’s amazing to me that here we are in Washington County and we can have a program like this. That to me is huge. We don’t have a lot here, but if we can start with this, this is going to impact their test scores, it will impact how they learn, it will impact the drug epidemic we have here. I really think it’s all related.”

Resource Coaches • Interview with Laura Thomas and Ashley Cirone

TREE's dynamic coaching model places an experienced resource person in each TREE school to promote a trauma-informed, resilience-focused climate where all children can learn; where teachers have knowledge, skills, and resources to meet student needs; and where administrators can envision and create schools that maximize student success and enrich the health of their community.

Ashley: This work has fulfilled everything I ever wanted when I thought I wanted to be in education. Especially in my world of special ed, all the red tape you have to go through to get help for a kid—this work has taken away all those barriers. Everyone gets access to TREE, there's no prerequisite, we're there for everybody. So it's been super fulfilling.



Ashley Cirone and Laura Thomas, Resource Coaches at Portside and Seabrook, respectively

Laura: “This is the work teachers want to do with kids... connecting with families on a deeper level, creating the relationships, the wraparound support. TREE gives me the opportunity to be the kind of educator I always wanted to be. Now I can support teachers who are hitting the same wall I used to hit, ‘I want to do this but...’ What’s the barrier? How can we work together to think and do differently?”

“The families feel like we’re advocates within the school. Their kids struggled for so many years and there’s so much history there, it’s nice to have someone they can trust to go to for support.”

Ashley: “Being able to respond when there’s a need is such an empowering thing, not just for the families but for us. I knew intellectually how much these supports were needed, but I never believed there were so many who needed us. I had a teacher tell me how good she felt knowing we went out and did grocery shopping for one of her kid’s families who didn’t have any food. For me I feel like that’s success. It’s empowering not just for the families but everyone involved.”

Laura: “TREE is changing people’s expectations. There’s this common accepted idea that some kids are going to fail. Parents who *were* those kids at one time are looking at their own kids thinking the same thing is going to happen for them. So when kids struggle in school, the parents think it’s going to be that way forever.

“TREE starts by making school a place where kids want to go every day—then kids actually get excited about going to school. That allows their parents to get connected in a way they never thought was possible, that wasn’t possible for them. So it’s changing what people think is possible through education. It becomes about what you hope it can be, not just what you’re stuck with it being.

“Kids are allowed to be kids with TREE at Seabrook. They’re not judged for being kids. They’re not forced into adult expectations. When you’re in a place that’s constantly judging you for being wrong, you start to expect retaliation. You think, ‘I can’t meet your impossible expectations, so why should I even try.’”

“You can’t take risks because you’re afraid. And taking risks is what education is all about! When kids are given the opportunity to be kids, it’s not like they can’t do school;

they do school even better. TREE takes those moments when kids are being kids and those moments are celebrated.”

Ashley: “We set out thinking about the students, but this has become about so much more. It’s become about the teachers, staff, families, community. Our focus is still with the kids, but if we support the adults, we support the kids, too.”

Laura: “As a teacher working in public school, connections with community organizations were often very one way, whereas with TREE we’re forming stronger and deeper partnerships, not just on the surface. I can see lots of gaps in services for the community. I would love for organizations to start filling in those gaps and figuring out how to respond as a group.”

Ashley: “Having grown up in Washington County, when I left for college I said I was never coming back—there was no opportunity here; why would I want to come back? And then I did, because this is where I wanted to raise my kids! And I feel like right now, TREE is bringing the conversation beyond Washington County, and its putting Washington County on the map. That feels really good for our schools. It’s very empowering and exciting. Also, the conversation around mental health is happening now in Downeast Maine. Even a few years ago, this was not the case. Even on my Facebook feed, people are sharing these snippets around mental health. The conversation is happening and that in itself is victory.”

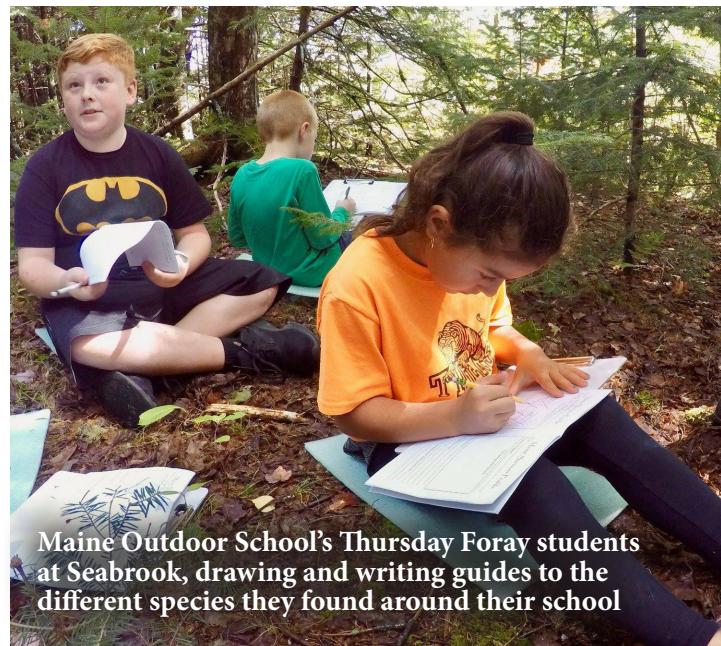
Partner Profile • Maine Outdoor School

Educators Hazel Stark and Joe Horn reflect on working with TREE

“Maine Outdoor School started collaborating with TREE to provide outdoor-based learning experiences, such as regular Thursday Forays and Forest Fridays, at Portside and Seabrook Elementary Schools during the spring of 2018. TREE has been a true partner, facilitating our shared aim of building personal and community resilience in rural Maine by putting students, their voices, and their potential at center stage.

“TREE has not only made our programs in these two rural schools possible, they have helped make teachers’ and students’ dreams come true by helping create a dynamic, personal, and responsive learning environment. Through the “Somedays” work that TREE has been doing in particular, I have witnessed students having their wishes come alive at school—something I had not observed before TREE became involved in local schools.

“MOS has been able to help provide some of the outdoor-based Somedays for TREE, such as a living willow shelter-building project with Portside 2nd graders, demonstrating the value we all place on the students and the resources that exist locally to support them.”



Maine Outdoor School’s Thursday Foray students at Seabrook, drawing and writing guides to the different species they found around their school

“The outdoor classroom has made many of my hands on/visual learners be successful and has increased their self-esteem, which has increased their participation in all academic areas. I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to have MOS be part of my science curriculum this year. As a teacher, I have learned right along with my students. — Alison Wallace, Grade 3 teacher Seabrook Elementary School, Spring 2019

Scaling TREE: the Resource Coach Model in a Small Maine City

Partner Profile • Jeremy Ray

“We see this becoming an all-hands-on-deck approach.”

Biddeford is a working class city of just over 21,000, some 20 miles south of Portland. It can be a challenging community, says Biddeford School Superintendent Jeremy Ray. “There’s a lot of poverty, a lot of drugs, a lot of kids moving in and out. My teachers are working overly hard to improve instruction and we’re just not seeing the gains I was hoping to, so it was time to try something else.

“When more than half of the kids are living in poverty, it’s challenging for any teacher to provide both instruction and social-emotional support. I started thinking, if we don’t get some support for staff, I am concerned about their mental health—it’s the same thing cities deal with all the time with fire fighters and paramedics. That’s where it led me to add the resource coach.”

It helps that Jeremy knows TREE director Brittany Ray pretty well—she’s his older sister. Both of them grew up in Seabrook, in a 12th generation family of Mainers. They share a similar can-do optimism. Still, it took Jeremy many months of TREE professional development to become convinced that this was the model for Biddeford.

One of the advantages of being a larger school district, says Jeremy, is that they already have guidance counselors and social workers, and now with the addition of two resource coaches, “we see this becoming a social emotional learning team, an all-hands-on deck approach.”



Jeremy Ray, Superintendent of the Biddeford, Maine school district

“Two years out, we hope to see an increase in attendance, better school engagement, and fewer symptoms of burnout with teachers.”



Partner Profile • Kelsey Langill

“If they get a little wet, it’s not the end of the world”

Kelsey is one of the sets of hands making up the Biddeford SEL team. School counselor for grades 4 and 5 at Biddeford Intermediate School (350 kids), she was sold on TREE right away, during the first professional development training she attended in Seabrook. “One of the most eye-opening things was when we were outside working with Maine Outdoor School, and all of the kids were out there. They go outside in pretty much any weather, 10 below zero, pouring rain. TREE makes sure the kids have all the equipment they need, getting the kids out and exposed and letting them run around.”

When Kelsey returned to Biddeford, it wasn’t long before she saw an opportunity to apply some of what she learned at Seabrook about giving students voice. “We have a tiny brook that goes through our playground, and in the past we’ve had this rule that kids weren’t supposed to play near the water. Well, this particular day the kids were poking sticks in the stream, and one kid comes to me and says, ‘Can we get all the bottles and trash out of the water?’ This was a kid who sometimes gets in trouble at recess. I said, ‘Why not?’ so he and four or five other kids teamed together to get all the trash.

“In our next staff training, I was telling that story, and I got some eye-rolls that I was letting kids break the rules, but the majority could see it was a positive thing. It was kids teaming together. Afterwards a few people said, ‘Thank you, that really reminded me that our kids are ten, and if their shoes get wet it’s not the end of the world.’ It was OUR fear that if we allowed a few students to this, it was going to turn into 200 kids in the water. But it didn’t. Roughly five kids began doing this at recess every week, using their time for something constructive and practicing their social skills. It really turned into a leadership activity for them.

“These kids, they’re ten, they live downtown, some of them have never even been to the beach even though it’s just a few miles away. We should be giving students these opportunities. THAT’S the mindset shift.

“Some of these kids, if you keep on barking ‘No!’ they’re going to zone you out, they’re not going to care. You’ve lost respect. So letting them have that kind of choice is really important.”

“I’m hopeful with TREE trainings, we can create more of a culture where SEL is all of our responsibilities, so we can better wrap around the needs of our students.”

With two new resource coaches joining Biddeford school staff this fall, there’s a good chance that student needs and voices will be heard, even if it means a few kids wind up with wet feet.

Jeremy is excited to see how the TREE model scales in a more urban setting in Maine. “We’re hoping to see the same positive results—whether it’s in a 500-kid primary school or an 800-student high school.



Kelsey Langill, counselor at Biddeford Intermediate School

“We need to look at spreading this work with other school departments, and doing professional development around social emotional learning, bringing city services like police, fire, general assistance into these trainings, so we can all be coordinated in our efforts to help families who are having difficulties.” - Jeremy Ray

Professional Development Coast to Coast

Partner Profile • Liz Morgan and Amy Wooliever

“All people want to be seen and heard. And all the components of TREE allow that to happen.”

As Liz Morgan and Amy Wooliever know well, rural isolation comes in many forms.

Liz is the principal of La Honda Elementary, a tiny school in the Santa Cruz mountains south of San Francisco. Situated a few hills over from one of the country’s major metropolitan areas, La Honda has a population of fewer than 1,000 people.

Amy is Superintendent of the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District, which comprises three schools, with a total enrollment of just over 300 students, roughly half of whom are English language learners.



California meets eastern Maine! The La Honda Pescadero team on a boat trip to Petit Manan Lighthouse

The two of them have just returned from Maine, where they attended a week-long TREE training at Cobscook Community Learning Center with a team from California. The unfolding collaboration with another rural community has been transformative for them.

“I’m so immersed in it now, everywhere I go, I can’t stop talking about it, even with my 15 year-old nephew!” Liz exclaims.

“Eager is not the right adjective, I feel ignited by the work we’re going to do with students and the fact that we’re not alone in this.”

Amy agrees. “We’re the one rural district in this area and it’s lonely work. There’s very little kinship with other districts here; most of the other rural districts are up north and they’re different, so it was really igniting to connect with folks in Maine and see that the work can be shared. It relieves the sense of isolation.”

There are multiple layers of isolation in rural areas, Liz points out—at the leadership level, the site level, the student level. “Many of our students can’t leave the communities. Most of our teachers are stand-alone grade levels. Not having a grade level team is isolating, We don’t have vice principals. But fortunately, we’re very like-minded about looking at our students through the lens of trauma.”

“It’s about the students, and creating systems across the school for all students. We talk a lot about the importance of relationship. We want our students to trust us.”

In early 2017, Amy and her staff began to realize they were putting millions of dollars into academic interventions that were not yielding the outcomes they wanted to see. They began to turn their focus to the relationships teachers and staff have with students and families. Around this time, TREE director Brittany Ray, along with

Seabrook Resource Coach Laura Thomas and Cobscook Community Learning Center co-founder Alan Furth, traveled out to California, and were introduced to the La Honda-Pescadero team.

After this meeting, Amy had an epiphany: she realized that the challenges facing her small district are the challenges of rurality. Emboldened by this discovery, she and another small Bay Area district, Bayshore, applied for and were granted a \$571,000 state grant to adopt trauma-informed practices in their schools, using TREE professional development support.

Amy draws inspiration from the way TREE calls on all the assets of a small community. As rural people know well, it can be harder to develop systems without the infrastructure that comes with a larger population. “We got from TREE the importance of using the community. Our communities have so much to offer. When you drive through small towns, you might see the beauty, but you might not know the greatness locals have to offer. TREE has really brought that to the fore.”

The training TREE provides stands out, Liz says, because it isn’t a checklist or a stock curriculum. “It’s the mission and vision and the fact that it’s a framework and you can weave the strategies into existing situations.” Again, she says, “It all comes back to relationships. And this is where there’s something special about a small district. We can make waves more quickly. I have 84 kids. Everyone’s going to get it.”

“We’re hitting the ground running. We’re following through, we care about you, you matter. Because all people want to be seen and heard. And all the components of TREE allow that to happen.”





Data Summary

The TREE Research Practice Partnership Team is responsible for the implementation and evaluation of the TREE process using a mix of methods based in developmental evaluation.

Performance on standardized tests improves

By June 2018, after just six months of working with TREE, Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) Scores increase significantly.

18% improvement in English Language Arts scores

2016-2017 40.74 % of students met or exceeded the standards
2017-2018 49.15 % of students met or exceeded the standards

28% improvement in Math scores

2016-2017 29.63 % of students met or exceeded the standards
2017-2018 40.68 % of students met or exceeded the standards

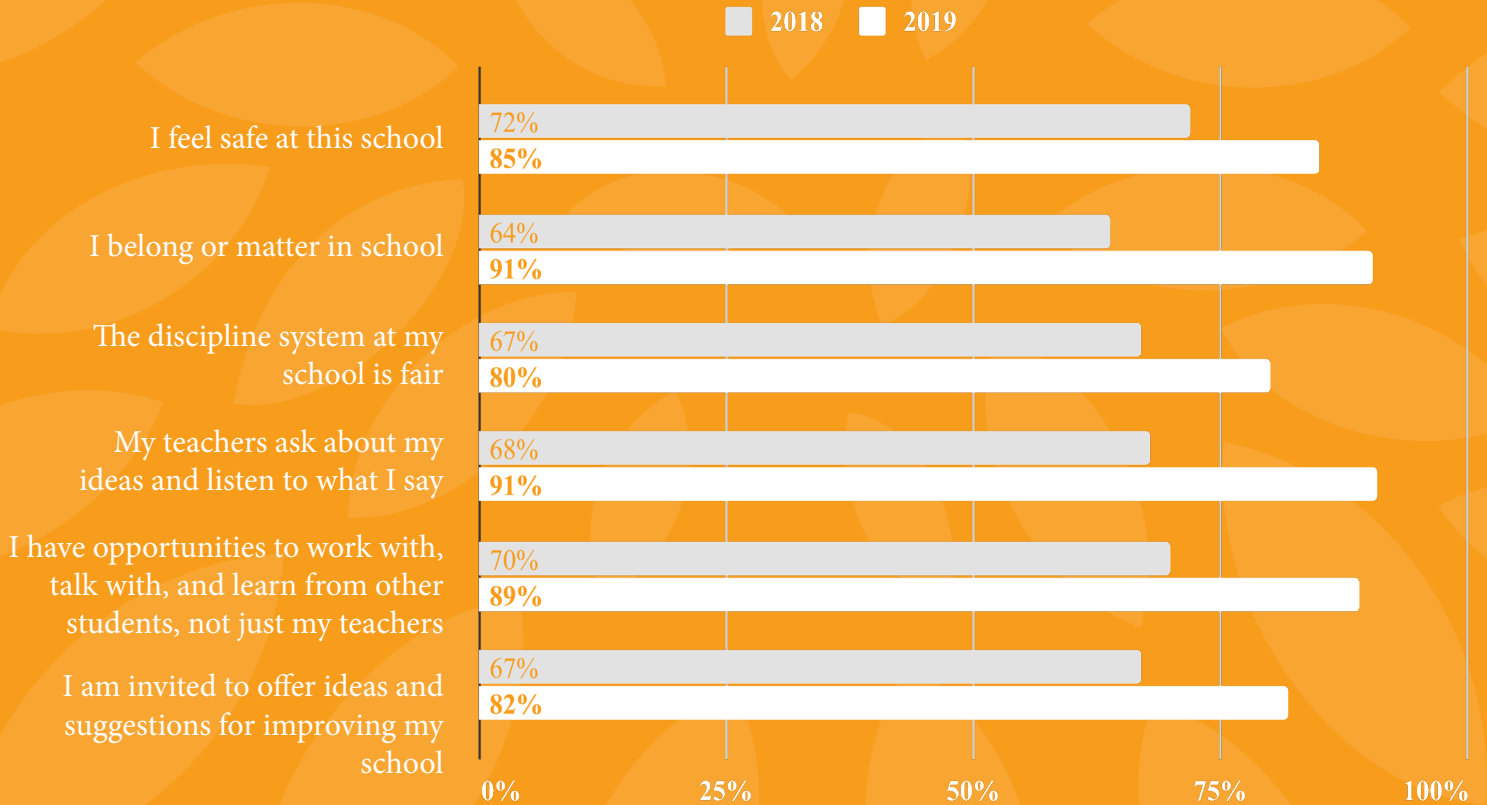
Absenteeism shows a steady decline, especially among students receiving TREE mental health services

From January 2018 through June 2019, chronic absenteeism declined from significantly above state averages to below state averages in both TREE schools. **Chronic absenteeism at Seabrook declined 50% from 2016 rates.**

Among students receiving TREE's Mental Health services, **55% showed improved attendance at Seabrook and 66% at Portside.**

One student receiving mental health care who had missed 37 days in 2017-2018 dropped to 10 absences in 2018-2019. Another student who had missed 25 days in 2017-2018 dropped to 7 absences in 2018-2019.

Significant improvement in school climate measures



Conclusion: Vision for the Future

The TREE process is founded in the act of listening. As in any responsive program, practitioners often navigate in uncharted waters. Surprise and wonder have marked every step of the way.

For those of us involved in TREE's design, the impact of the pilot program has been more than we even dreamed was possible. We underestimated the hunger and collective determination in rural schools and communities, to center education around equity, wellbeing, and supportive relationships.

Based on TREE's resounding early outcomes, we believe these groundbreaking practices have the potential to truly transform rural education in America.

Setting out to meet the community call to address childhood trauma in rural schools, TREE uncovered a hunger in all students to have a voice. Providing training and support to educators in trauma-informed, whole-child practices, we found that teachers, too, have a longing to be seen, heard, and valued.

There's a palpable sense of hopefulness among students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and community partners in our pilot schools now. The TREE dream is alive in the hearts of people from Downeast Maine to coastal California. There is no stuffing this back in a bottle, burying it under sand on an isolated beach.

TREE invites us to imagine more. Hope bigger.

TREE invites us to aspire toward schools that serve everyone: adults and children, parents and teachers, community partners and administrators. Schools that are thriving hubs for all members of rural communities. Schools where relationships are nurtured; where children's knowledge, experience, culture, and language are respected and celebrated; where collective resources are harnessed to serve everyone; where basic needs including mental health care are met; where adults are supported in the challenging daily work of maintaining safe, engaging, equitable learning environments for all students.

This is the kind of school—and community—that is taking shape now in rural Maine and California. With all our voices and dedicated support, this is the reality TREE promises for rural America.

Thanks from the whole TREE team

Brittany Ray, TREE Director

Alan Furth, CCLC and TREE Co-Founder

Ashley Cirone, Resource Coach, Portside Elementary

Laura Thomas, Resource Coach, Seabrook Elementary

Maggie Burgos, Multilingual Leadership Corps, Seabrook Elementary

Catharine Biddle, Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership, University of Maine

Lyn Mikel Brown, Professor of Education, Colby College

Mark Tappan, Professor of Education, Colby College

Genesis Cazalez-Contreras, Meghan Charest, Jada Lamb, Research Assistants

Serita Corey-Childs, LCSW, RPT-S, Mental Health Therapist, Portside Elementary.

Sue Carroll Duffy, Psy. D., RPT-S, Mental Health Therapist and Founder of Moving Stories Method

Kandi Robertson, LCSW, RPT, Mental Health Therapist, Seabrook Elementary

Jessica Schaefer, LCPC-C, CADC, Mental Health Therapist, Seabrook and Portside Elementaries

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Short list of TREE Research and Outreach:

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