

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2020 Essay Contest

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. The essay prompt for 2020 asked students to propose how they would make Maine “the way life should be” for young people so that more of them will choose to live in a state with one of the oldest populations in the nation. Essays have been edited for length.

SECOND-PLACE ESSAY

Progress for Young Mainers Paved by Education

by Michael P. Delorge

Nearly seven decades ago, Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine proclaimed the following: “for it is youth that gives the stimulus, the fire, and the ambition that animates progress.” Progress, in fact, is necessary: necessary technologically, economically, psychologically, and politically. Oftentimes, children are told that they are the future of our nation. While empirically true, many young people in the United States and in Maine today do not feel empowered. With this lack of “fire” and “ambition,” an important piece of the equation to progress is fundamentally missing. Without our youth actively engaged in society, their future and the future of our communities is uncertain. The fact of the matter is that youth do not feel that their voice matters in our democracy, but rather, that older Americans heed the call of civic engagement, contributing to our economy and way of life more so than they can. This age divide manifests itself in all aspects of Maine life.

According to a report by *U.S. News and World Report*, Maine has the oldest population as “nearly 21 percent of Maine’s population is over age 65, and it maintained the oldest median age in the

country last year at 44.9 years” (Soergel 2019). Additionally, a report from the Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services (DAFS) states that the population of citizens over the age of 65 will rise 37 percent from 2016 to 2026, whereas the population of citizens under 19 will fall 12 percent (Maine State Economist 2018). Not only is our state the oldest, but we are on track to increase both our average age and the gap that separates these two generations. In other words, we are on track to lose Maine’s younger population. The DAFS report further recognizes that Maine needs “to continue to pursue policies and opportunities that will continue to attract young people” (Maine State Economist 2018). This observation then raises the question: if we understand that this problem is a state strategic imperative, how does Maine successfully attract a younger population while staying true to our motto, “the way life should be?” I believe the answer to this question is twofold: we, as Mainers, must empower youth through education and improve upon our children’s professional futures. This goal is attainable by providing Maine’s young people with tangible proof that Maine

has everything they need to be happy, successful, and so much more.

Fundamentally, education is of the utmost importance in ensuring a promising future for the state of Maine. One of the most fruitful avenues to promote education would be to increase K–12 funding from the state to ease the financial burden on poor or rural municipalities, communities where many youth believe that there is no future for them. In fact, Maine has attempted this course of action before. In 2004, Maine residents voted on a referendum to hold the state government accountable for funding 55 percent (or more) of each educational district’s funding level. After being approved by a simple majority, the bill (LD 1372) was voted into law.¹

Every year since the law’s inception, the state has failed to meet this obligation by at least 15 percent (Educate Maine 2018). This failure of our state government deeply saddens me. Within the past few years, I have interacted with students from rural communities that surround my high school who are sure that there is nothing for them in rural northern Maine, that moving out of state for college is more promising than remaining at home. Many young Mainers fail to see an educational system that offers a promising future here at home. To remedy this, the state of Maine must invest in our local public school systems to provide children an educational model that works, to show them that Maine has a desirable career and way of life to offer.

Increasing state funding for public schools would provide Maine children with valuable and unique educational opportunities to expand their horizons outside of the typical classroom. This action would send a strong message that the state values all learning that

contributes to children's futures. For example, investing money into trade centers, like that of my hometown's Biddeford Center of Technology, will allow more teens to learn trades and earn certifications. Many of my Biddeford friends currently have two trade certifications before I have put down a deposit for college! These necessary trades embody the do-it-yourself spirit native to our great state. We must value and advertise these career possibilities. Maine must also invest in its local STEM-focused corporations such as laboratories or design-based manufacturers with stipulations that they must encourage community outreach to local public schools. Research entities with global connections such as the Jackson Laboratory or MDI Biological Laboratory would be able to show high school students that there are promising STEM careers for them in Maine that also have a foot on the scientific world stage.

Notifying young people of the innovative research at Boothbay's Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences on the warming Gulf of Maine will provide a stimulating STEM topic to scientifically minded Maine high school students on an issue close to home. To ensure a prosperous future for our state and guarantee that young people stay here at home, Maine state government must make these avenues available financially through the outlet of education. They must uphold the promise that they made to our youth over 15 years ago.

After our young people graduate, many of them—roughly 60 percent—choose to attend a four-year university whether at one of Maine's prestigious universities such as the University of Maine, Bates, Colby, Bowdoin, the University of New England, or somewhere outside Maine. Ultimately, however, Maine must invest outside the sphere of post-secondary education as

well. We must ensure that the roughly 40 percent of Maine high school graduates who believe that a traditional brick-and-mortar college experience is not for them, are still able to contribute to our state socially and economically (Mitchell Institute 2014). Not only should we invest in the aforementioned trades, but we must also allocate money to Maine high school graduates who have other career plans. Namely, we must invest money into young Maine entrepreneurs looking to begin a start-up, the future of our state's economy. One way to accomplish this might be to allow young Mainers to apply for tax credits through the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development to promote the financial beginnings of their companies. This simple allocation of state funds would ensure that ambitious young Mainers could find a strong foothold in their state's economy and send the message that Maine is happy to have them home.

With the understanding from Senator Margaret Chase Smith that the way forward is paved by youth, we must show them not only that Maine can be everything they want it to be, but that Maine is home. There is no better way to accomplish this goal than for Maine's government to take measures to ensure their success within our state. Ultimately, we can accomplish this by investing money in the foundation of our youth: their elementary and secondary education. We must provide them with an educational model that works for them by making available a plethora of possible career avenues with which they can contribute to our state. Encouraging young Mainers to feel their own "fire" and "ambition," as Senator Smith puts it, while they give back and contribute to their communities and economy is how we make Maine "the way life should be." 🐼

NOTES

- 1 [https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_School_Finance_and_Tax_Reform_Carry-over,_Question_1_\(2004\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Maine_School_Finance_and_Tax_Reform_Carry-over,_Question_1_(2004))
<https://legislature.maine.gov/lawlibrary/votes-on-initiated-bills-1910/9204/>

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Michael Delorge, from Biddeford, Maine, graduated from the Maine School of Science and Mathematics. Delorge is an Eagle Scout and participated in his

school's student senate, jazz ensemble, and cross country and volleyball teams. He was also selected as one of two Maine delegates to the United State Senate Youth Program. Michael holds a great interest in public health policy and plans to major in biology and political science at the University of Maine Honors College.