



Maine SSN Builds Pipeline for Policy Impact with Fellows Program

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Maine public schools have long suffered from a teacher shortage. One of the reasons: low teacher pay. In fact, the pay for teachers in Maine is lower than in any other New England state, with starting salaries set at \$40,000. As an education scholar, SSN member [Lauren Stark](#) is deeply focused on improving learning and working conditions in schools, and via the [Maine SSN](#) chapter's policy fellows program she was able to quickly get involved in the effort to raise teacher pay last year.

Through the chapter's policy fellows program, Stark got connected to the Maine Education Association (MEA), the teacher's union in the state and the key group behind the push for a higher starting salary for teachers. In working with MEA, Stark would go on to testify in front of the Maine legislature on the issue multiple times, and even penned an [OpEd for the local Bangor Daily News](#) making the case that higher salaries are needed to recruit high-quality teachers.

"I have appreciated the collaboration with the Scholars Strategy Network in Maine," said John Kozinski, Government Relations Director at MEA. "Faculty members and scholars have a wealth of knowledge and information that can help inform and shape the major debates in our state, including lifting compensation for teachers and addressing the concerns of public schools. I so appreciate all they bring to the discussion. We are all better off when we listen to those most informed, especially those who have dedicated their careers to research."

Stark's story is a prime example of what chapter leaders [Rob Glover](#), [Jordan LaBouff](#), and [Karyn Sporer](#) hoped to achieve by launching the chapter policy fellows program last academic year. "At the start of the program, we ask specifically: What sorts of experiences do you want to have? What sorts of relationships do you want to build? What are the skills that you want to gain?" said Glover. "And then we construct a work plan around where we see elements of commonality and also work individually with fellows who have things that are kind of distinctive."

The initial cohort for the 2022-23 academic year consisted of [five fellows](#), and due to its success the chapter has doubled the program this year with a total of [ten fellows](#). The program works by providing fellows with training, mentorship and one-on-one support, as well as connections to relevant policy actors in the state. Fellows also have an opportunity to write an OpEd for the Maine chapter's long standing column with the Bangor Daily News.

The idea for the cohort came out of a realization that the chapter wanted to restart policy engagement opportunities that were put on pause at the start of the covid pandemic, while also recruiting new members from colleges and universities across the state. Prior to the pandemic, these efforts were channeled through

working groups that gathered scholars on a shared topic and identified opportunities for engagement. But following the pandemic, their focus had to shift.

“I think one of the things that faculty, and maybe early career faculty in particular, are more cognizant of now is not working for free,” mentioned Sporer. “So with this fellowship you have something that you can put on your CV, you get a stipend, and you can meet people in different disciplines, but in the same state, to work together for a common goal.”

For this year’s cohort, the chapter leaders gathered all fellows in the late fall to learn more about their research and public engagement goals. Following the meeting, they set out to identify areas of common interest and individual mentors who could help fellows make an impact on state policy. LaBouff expressed enthusiasm in working with this new cohort, stating that, “there are a lot of folks that are relatively new to the state, who are in their first few years of faculty positions. I think the cohort nature of the fellows program is attractive to them and will also be useful in making new connections with faculty, even at their own institutions in some cases.”

Looking ahead, the chapter hopes to continue expanding the fellowship program in the state to bring in new researchers, while offering new opportunities to current and past fellows. From a visit to the state house, to mentorship opportunities for prior fellows, there are many possibilities for the future of the Maine policy fellows program to serve as pipeline for local scholars to maximize the impact of their research.