



MOFGA Comments In Support Of

LD 550 - An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools

and

LD 895 - An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program

March 13, 2025

Dear Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry,

On behalf of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), I am submitting comments in support of both LD 550 - *An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools* and LD 895 - *An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program*.

A broad-based community, MOFGA is transforming our food system by supporting farmers, empowering people to feed their communities, and advocating for an organic future. We extend quality, agriculture-based education to young people across Maine. We're working hard to create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. MOFGA certifies 537 organic farms and processing operations representing more than \$120 million in sales. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people, and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.

We are excited about the prospects of both of these bills. LD 550 seeks to create the Maine Experiential Education Program within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry provide Maine schools with outdoor and experiential hands-on learning opportunities related to gardens, food and agriculture. The program would improve students' health and academic, physical and emotional development, and would provide related professional development opportunities for educators. LD 895 would, under the leadership of Maine's Cooperative Extension Service, create the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program and Fund, providing immersive outdoor education for Maine's 4th through 8th graders. We are particularly excited about the opportunities that these initiatives would provide for encouraging students to learn about healthy, local, organic and sustainable food and agriculture systems and we would be happy to engage in this program where possible.

At MOFGA we offer garden-based education to members of the public year-round, both in-person and online, as well as at the Common Ground Fair every September. We partner with the Maine School Garden Network, where one our Community Education Director sits on the board. Since 1998, we have been welcoming school groups to our Common Ground Education Center where they participate in projects in our gardens and orchards, including many groups of students. Students from the Ecology Learning Center, Ironwood and Maine Academy of Natural Sciences are regular visitors and participants in our educational programs.



We are well aware of how meaningful these programs are in terms of enabling more effective learning and better behavioral outcomes for students. Once a school has the chance to trial a garden program and begins to see some of these outcomes manifest themselves - for instance, lower instances of behavioral referrals or more effective science learning - it will likely become easier for them to justify the continued costs of such programs even after grant funds have expired after three years.

We also see many connections between the program that this bill would initiate and our goal of supporting the growth of a healthier food system for all.

A core part of building a healthy food system is building awareness about our current agricultural system. Where does our food come from? What does it look and feel like to be a farmer in Maine today? What does it actually cost to produce quality food - that is, food grown in a way that allows farmers and farmworkers to make a decent living, and that respects ecosystem health and conserves natural resources? These are questions that we need more Mainers to reflect on regularly. LD 550 and LD 895 could support the growth of a healthy and fair food system, as it could help kids build connections between the food that they, and their communities, produce and the food that they prepare and eat.

Exposure to gardening in young kids and teenagers can have lifelong effects perhaps prompting an interest in farm work, forestry or landscaping as a meaningful career, or an interest (paired with the ability) to grow food for one's own family, boosting their health and food security. Both have tremendous value.

We also see this as a justice and equity issue. We know that better-funded school districts are more likely to be able to fund their own gardener educator positions without any grant assistance, offering their students the opportunity to reap all the health, learning and behavioral benefits of this programming. But children in all parts of Maine deserve a quality education. This grant program would help level the playing field so that kids in communities of all kinds could benefit from these opportunities.

Thank you for your consideration and support of this important legislation.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Heather Spalding".

Heather Spalding
Deputy Director - Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association