

TESTIMONY OF MATT BERNSTEIN

LD 1064 – Ought to Pass

An Act to Increase the Minimum Teacher Salary

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 6, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Matt Bernstein, I am a resident of Portland and I am the 2023 Maine Teacher of the Year. In this testimony, I am writing as a private citizen and not as a representative of any school, district, or organization.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in favor of LD #1064. I urge you to support this bill because I believe that raising the minimum teacher salary will have a direct impact on increasing and strengthening the teaching workforce in Maine.

Data shows that Maine, like many states across the country, is experiencing a teacher shortage. A recent Maine Monitor article reveals that in 2022, more than 1,300 teachers, education technicians, administrators and other educators in Maine left their jobs, and 927 educators retired. Both numbers represent seven year highs.

It is imperative that we take action to address this shortage so that we can ensure that Maine students have access to the highest quality education possible. Right now, so many schools are stretched thin because of a lack of staff. At times, teachers are being asked to cover classes during prep periods, which in turn impacts the ability for teachers to prepare for future lessons, or schools are being pushed to increase class sizes, which limits the ability for teachers to provide individualized attention, or schools are unable to find enough staff to support programming at their school, which may lead to cuts that limit the options students have in their education. For many reasons, when we do not have enough teachers, the quality of education that we can provide goes down.

While, undoubtedly, the causes of a teacher shortage are multifaceted and complex, it is also known that low salaries play a role in people choosing not to pursue teaching as a career or teachers choosing to leave the profession. When I was in college, people would often ask why I was pursuing a teaching career, when I could make more money in other fields. Indeed, my student teaching cohort, representing seniors and post-grad students, had only six members. We also know that low salaries can be a barrier to those who want to become teachers, but need to pursue higher paying professions to pay loans or support their families. Finally, we know that the cost of living is increasing in Maine and across the country. We need to ensure that we are compensating our starting teachers so that people are able to become teachers and remain in the profession without undue financial burden.

In my experience, I've found that when people talk about teachers, the narrative focuses on how teaching is a calling and how teachers join the profession as an act of service. While I appreciate these sentiments and agree that my inspiring colleagues are dedicated and selfless, I also think it is important that we acknowledge that teaching is a profession and that salary is an important component of attracting and retaining teachers. Indeed, like any profession, if we want to attract the best people to teaching, we need to be offering competitive salaries. Through increasing the minimum teacher salary, I believe that we will see more people pursue teaching and more starting teachers remain in the field, both of which will positively impact Maine students and communities.

Finally, I believe that increasing the minimum teacher salary will communicate an important belief about teachers: that they are valued professionals deserving of compensation that reflects their importance in society. While this bill focuses on minimum salaries, the impact of passing this will reach all teachers because it will demonstrate a collective support from the state and a unified commitment to teachers. This bill is the type of positive action that will mean a lot to all teachers.

For all these reasons, I think increasing the minimum teacher salary would help improve education in Maine. I strongly urge the Committee to vote unanimously ought to pass.

Thank you for your time, for the opportunity to submit this testimony, and for considering this in your deliberations.