



Maine School of Science and Mathematics

A Residential Community of Academic Excellence

23 April 2023

Dear Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Dr. Helana Brigman, and I have had the enormous privilege of serving the Maine School of Science Mathematics (MSSM) in several roles. First, as a camper in MSSM's Nurturing Nature and Numbers summer camp for girls in the late '90s; second, as an instructor of English; and now, as MSSM's Academic Dean. As a poor child growing up in a single-parent home in Rockland, Maine, MSSM provided me with my first opportunities in STEM Education. I attended the MSSM summer camp on need-based aid, where I learned to build my own website, code in HTML, process photographic film, and gaze at the stars. Opportunities like these were not available to students like me, and I knew my experience at MSSM was special. So special that I still do these things today.

I speak from personal experience when I say that MSSM allowed me to grow and thrive in ways I never could at home. When I applied for a teaching position in 2017, I remember thanking the search committee for even talking with me because my experience at MSSM had been so transformative and powerful. As a recent doctoral graduate of Louisiana State University and a published author, I wanted to serve the state of Maine and Maine students. Later when a committee member asked why I had never attended MSSM as a full-time student, I explained that even at one or two thousand dollars, the room and board fees to attend MSSM were too cost-inhibitive for my family. In the late '90s, my family lived in low-income housing, and we could not afford meat, only eating fish when it was caught by a local fisherman who was a friend of our family. The committee member sighed and said, "I've heard this before."

There are many Maine students who are like me: curious, engaged, and eager to learn, but lacking the financial resources to take advantage of an MSSM education. Today, MSSM's current room and board fees are \$9,800 per student. *\$9,800 per student*. While this number may not seem like a lot of money to some people, it is an impossible number for many. As a public high school, MSSM should be available to *all* Maine students regardless of their socio-economic background. *LD 1458: An Act to Increase Funding for the Maine School of Science and Mathematics*, submitted by Senator Troy Jackson, puts us not one—but *many*—steps closer to achieving this goal. By increasing MSSM's funding and eliminating the cost of room and board fees paid by Maine families, any student, like myself, would have access to an MSSM education.

I want to thank the committee for their time, and I would be remiss if I did not mention the role schools like MSSM play in developing Maine's workforce and providing opportunities for upward mobility. I am a personal example of this. In other states, such as North Carolina, students never see the cost of room and board because the price to attend state magnet schools like the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics is free. I am a founding faculty member of the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics in Morganton, NC, the #1 high school in the country, which serves a wide range of students from diverse and underprivileged backgrounds. I believe that *LD 1458* affords us a similar opportunity to ensure greater equity amongst Maine students while also growing and fostering the Maine workforce.

Thank you, again, for your time, and I hope I can count on your support of *LD 1458*. In doing so, you support a future where any Maine student who wishes to attend MSSM can. In doing so, you support

MSSM's Mission to "benefit the state of Maine." In doing so, you ensure that all Maine students have the chance to thrive.

Sincerely,

Helana E. Brigman, Ph.D., Academic Dean
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