

Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

I am writing to express my support for increased funding for the Maine School of Science and Mathematics (MSSM). As you are aware, MSSM has received flat-funded appropriations since FY2017, and is currently slated to remain at this funding level through FY2025. The accumulated effects of this funding model are unsustainable, and have resulted in diminished real wages for employees, the elimination of essential positions, and a threatened ability for the school to serve Maine's students into the future.

Since FY2017, wages at the school have increased at less than half of the Consumer Price Index rate, reducing the school's ability to attract and retain staff. Several key positions have been eliminated or reduced to balance the school's budget. The school has re-organized multiple times to make do with limited human resources, including the elimination or reduction of many positions. Notably, the school has eliminated critical roles including its Dean of Faculty, Dean of Students, International Student Coordinator, a business office position, an admissions position, and multiple adjunct instructor contracts during this time period. Sustainability in funding, predictability in roles, and a guarantee of fair compensation are all key to attracting and retaining talented and dedicated staff.

This Bill provides an increase for the next two fiscal years to help provide a critically needed increase to wages; address cost increases for transportation, lease payments, books and supplies; and reinstate critical positions in the areas of student support, instruction, admissions, and operations that were eliminated due to budget constraints.

The Bill would also provide funding in order to eliminate the room and board fee that Maine families must pay to attend. MSSM currently charges Maine families \$9,800 in room and board. When MSSM was founded, fees were much lower and much more accessible to Maine families. Maine is rare in how it charges room and board to attend a STEM magnet school. No other state asks as much from its families. Among the National Consortium of Secondary STEM Schools, only one school (TAMS, part of the Texas public university system) charges families more for room & board.

A large part of the existence of MSSM was to create an opportunity for high-achieving students without the financial means to attend private institutions, and ten thousand dollars a year is an insurmountable obstacle for many if not most Maine families. Speaking to my own experience, the current room & board fees would prevent me from attending MSSM. I had worked with my parents trying to find a way to finance my education at an institution that provided a more academic opportunities than Rockland District High School was able to. Unfortunately, as a family with a single income, we were not able to find a workable solution to the finances. With the creation of MSSM, we found an incredible opportunity. There always have, and will always continue to be, opportunities for those who are lucky enough to grow up with the financial means. The beauty and power of MSSM to the state of Maine is that, historically, it was able to provide that same level of opportunity to those without the financial means. To require a significant annual payment is a tragically shortsighted approach to empowering and growing students who will become Maine's next cohort of leaders.

As an alumni, I can attest to the transformative experience of attending MSSM. Twenty-five years on from my time in Limestone, I now work in education, am active in local politics, and own my own business, all here in Maine. The education and opportunities provided by MSSM are unparalleled and have a lasting impact on the lives of its students, and the future of this great state. However, due to continued flat-funding the cost could put it out of reach for many Maine families, and the elimination of key roles could place the future of the school in jeopardy. The proposed funding increase is critical to maintaining the quality of education and equitable opportunities provided by MSSM.

I urge you to support this Bill and increase funding for MSSM to ensure that the school can continue to provide high-quality education and opportunities to Maine's students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,  
Seth Dresser  
Bridgton, ME