

Healthy Communities of the Capital Area Mission:
to convene and support people, organizations, and communities to collaborate on quality of life and public health issues

Testimony of Renee Page, Executive Director, Healthy Communities of the Capital Area,
fiscal and staffing home to the Maine Farm & Sea to School Network

In Support of LD 1682 An Act To Create the Maine Experiential Education Program

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleucker, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry. My name is Renee Page. I am a resident of Farmingdale and Executive Director at Healthy Communities of the Capital Area (HCCA) in Gardiner. HCCA is the fiscal and staffing home to the Maine Farm & Sea to School Network (MFSN) that hosts the annual Maine Farm & Sea to School Institute. MFSN is a statewide food systems network that supports the 3 pillars of farm to school: local food procurement, agriculture education, and experiential learning as both public health and economic development strategies.

Today, I am submitting testimony in support of LD 1682 “An Act To Create the Maine Experiential Education Program.”

In addition to being an original founding member of the ME Farm & Sea to School Network, I am a parent and a former school nutrition director, and have seen firsthand the positive impact experiential learning can have. From higher test scores to improved health behaviors and confidence-building, experiential learning provides memorable experiences and reaches more children than a traditional classroom setting. These factors play a role in **both physical and mental health** from the simple act of exposure to fresh air and sunshine to the unique teambuilding and interaction that experiential learning provides.

One way MFSN supports experiential learning is through the newly established annual **Maine Farm & Sea to School Institute**. This year-long institute provides school teams with tools, resources, and networking opportunities to create their own local action plans and strategies that encompass the classroom, cafeteria, and community, with support from a farm to school Coach. These coach positions, though temporary, illustrate the need for a **dedicated individual to support farm to school implementation to ensure success**. Action plans often include identifying an individual within the school or district to lead and implement these activities going forward. Herein is where the challenge lies - funding a dedicated position to help implement and institutionalize for the long term.

As a former FoodCorps Service Site and Healthy Maine Partnership, HCCA has seen first-hand the **power of having a dedicated individual embedded within a school or district to oversee and implement** experiential learning initiatives. Quite often positive experiential learning opportunities are created by a teacher or individual driven to do so, but more often than not, are not sustained due to competing priorities,

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the champion individual leaving the school, or the lack of a formal plan or dedicated resources to sustain it.

Schools were forced during COVID to be creative with how they could safely teach once children started returning to in-person instruction. Many of them leveraged stimulus funds to create outdoor experiential learning opportunities and discovered it is an effective way to engage children in the learning process. Continuing this type of instruction is desired by school officials, teachers, and students, but in order for it to be effective and sustained, it needs additional support with dedicated personnel and formal sustainability plans.

Maine is a special place that lends itself naturally to experiential learning. Having children discover all our state has to offer and develop an appreciation for it at an early age through effective experiential learning, can help them in deciding to stay here to start careers and raise families.

Please support LD 1682 to help develop and sustain experiential learning opportunities throughout Maine schools. Thank you Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleucker, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry for your time and commitment to Maine's children and schools. Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions you may have.

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