



**Testimony in Support of  
LD 1682, An Act to Create the Maine Experiential Education Program**

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Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Vanessa Berry. I am the Sustainable Maine Outreach Coordinator for the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of LD 1682.

In my role at NRCM, I work directly with Maine organizations, businesses, and schools to address sustainability challenges and find meaningful solutions that support Maine people and our environment. Before my work with NRCM, I started my career in an elementary school where I provided one-on-one support for students who were struggling in the traditional classroom setting, and I organized the school's Green Team after hours. I am excited by the learning opportunities for all students that would be made possible with passage of LD 1682.

LD 1682 establishes a program to fund school staff positions that support hands-on opportunities for students to engage in agriculture-based education. An important example of the need for more education around local agriculture occurred in the height of the pandemic, a time when most people saw sparse or empty produce shelves at their major supermarkets because of an unraveling supply chain. During this increased time at home, many Mainers spent their free time learning how to bake their own bread or grow their own food. For me personally, the sight of empty grocery shelves was what finally pushed me to invest in Community Supported Agriculture at my local farms for the first time. With increased investments in education at Maine schools about growing food and sourcing food locally, we can help create healthier and more resilient communities that are less dependent on global food systems and over-processed, prepared foods.

In the school setting, there is a significant benefit to students when schools integrate outdoor learning opportunities. Garden education offers hands-on experiential learning to all students. It utilizes different skills, allows kids to show what they know in a new way, and it provides a direct connection to the wonders of our natural environment. This can be particularly beneficial for students who might struggle with academic success or behaviors in the traditional classroom setting. In NRCM's existing partnerships with schools, many school projects rely on a clear champion or small team of dedicated staff within the school community who will carry the torch and ensure the sustainability of any new initiatives. Creating a designated staff position will help to ensure the success of these programs, rather than relying on parent or community volunteers with limited capacity and resources to support this work.

Additionally, school gardens provide an opportunity for cafeterias to become informal classrooms that extend learning. Students will have more excitement around trying different fruits and vegetables they grew themselves and more awareness around the potential of wasted food, which is a growing environmental issue. This program is a great opportunity for schools to also incorporate food waste-reduction practices through education and implementing new procedures

for saving uneaten food for human consumption, feeding animals, composting, or anaerobic digestion. In our work at NRCM, we serve as a resource to help Maine schools make use of edible food and reduce food waste through education, small-scale funding for waste reduction infrastructure, and logistical support, but this work continues with the day-to-day support of our dedicated school champions.

Creating a program with funding to support agriculture-based education helps Maine students gain exposure to new healthy foods and learn skills that can allow them to be more resilient, and it also ensures that schools have a dedicated champion, which is the key to sustain this work. Thank you for the opportunity to show our support, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.