



**Testimony in Opposition to LD 1748: “An Act to Reform the School Budget Referendum Process by Limiting the Circumstances in Which Referenda Occur”**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and the distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Nick Murray and I serve as director of policy for Maine Policy Institute. We are a free market think tank, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization that advocates for individual liberty and economic freedom in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to testify **in opposition to LD 1748**.

This bill would simply push school district officials farther away from the local taxpayers who fund them. It would exempt school budgets from accountability, full stop.

The irony is staggering considering the sponsors fashion themselves as “champions of democracy,” yet this bill would usher in a world where a small handful of people in each district would dictate how much their community’s property taxes go up each year.

Today, school administrative units (SAUs) must have their budgets approved by local voters in a referendum, unless the voters affirmatively choose to suspend that requirement. LD 1748 would turn this process on its head, allowing school boards and superintendents to write and institute their own budgets without public approval, unless community members gather signatures equal to 20% of the votes cast for governor in the last available election.

This signature requirement in the current opt-out provision for local budget referendums is only 10% of the total votes for governor. This is the same for other citizen-initiated local questions.<sup>1</sup> In state law, the 20% threshold is more often used to establish new local administrative districts, like a watershed<sup>2</sup> or sanitary district,<sup>3</sup> or for voters to change the format of a local budget referendum.<sup>4</sup>

Proponents of statewide initiatives must only meet the 10% threshold as well. In other words, this would be an unprecedented shift in how local officials are held accountable by taxpayers and the members of their community. If sponsors, and this committee, deem this standard appropriate, will they move to raise the statewide initiative signature threshold to 20% as well?

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<sup>1</sup> [Title 30-A, §2528](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Title 38, §2002](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Title 38, §1101](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Title 20-A, §15693](#)

Or, is this bill a blatant attempt to provide cover for ballooning school budgets—amid falling test scores and climbing youth mental health troubles—by obfuscating local budget processes from effective public scrutiny?

Requiring voters to opt-in to transparency is anathema to the ethos of democratic and representative government. State legislators should not diminish the standards of accountability for local governments and school districts, the two most consequential levels of public administration in our lives. Since school costs are the most prominent driver of municipal expenses and thus property taxes, it is beyond irresponsible to remove these spending decisions from public scrutiny.

Please **deem LD 1748 “Ought Not To Pass”** and retain the current system of local accountability, which if for any reason should be altered, should be in the service of greater transparency and public knowledge, not less. Thank you for your time and consideration.