



**Testimony in Support of LD 1741**, “An Act to Promote Educational Opportunity Through the Educational Choice Tax Credit Program, Eliminating Certain Restrictions on Charter Schools and Virtual Public Charter Schools, Allowing More Entities to Authorize Charter Schools and Clarifying Educational Policy on Immunization Requirements,” **LD 1798**, “An Act to Support School Choice by Establishing Empowerment Scholarship Accounts,” **LD 1838**, “An Act to Create the Empowerment Scholarship Account Program,” **LD 1841**, “An Act to Establish the Hope and Inclusion Scholarship Program,” **and LD 1860**, “An Act to Create the Educational Opportunity Account Program.”

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 support of LDs 1741, 1798, 1838, 1841, 1860**.

A nationwide poll of more than 2,500 parents conducted in 2022 found that more than 20% of public district school parents are either “very dissatisfied” or “somewhat dissatisfied” with their child’s educational experience. Similarly, about 20% of charter school parents and 15% of private school parents feel the same way.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, families are craving more options. No matter what the ultimate form education takes for each child, whether a traditional district school, a private school, public charter school, homeschool, or something different, more choices will lead to more satisfied parents and more empowered youth. Choice allows education tax dollars to be spent in the most effective way possible. Instead of being budgeted through opaque local school board processes to school buildings and fixed-cost bylines, students’ education funds will be directed by those closest to them, who know them best.

It shouldn’t have to be said, but in this day and age, it does: children belong to their parents, not to their ZIP code-defined public school district.

Various programs which allow families to direct where their child’s education dollars are spent—like a tax-credit scholarship as proposed in LD 1741, or an education savings account (ESA) as proposed in LDs 1798, 1838, 1841, and 1860—can bring immense benefit to a student’s academic career. Both programs allow for funding to

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<sup>1</sup> [Schooling in America Polling Dashboard](#) | EdChoice.org

follow students and support their education regardless of whether in a public, private, or non-traditional learning environment.<sup>2</sup> The effects of these two types of programs are very similar, though they can be structured differently.

Tax-credit scholarships allow taxpayers (individuals and businesses) to receive full or partial credit from donations to nonprofits which provide private school scholarships. Today, 21 states offer some form of tax-credit scholarship program, within which more than 312,000 students take part.

A student with an ESA receives a portion of their slice of per-pupil funding, usually just from the state level, which is then loaded into a debit card which parents may use to fund any part of their child's education. The state audits the transactions of the accounts to prevent fraud. As of the 2023 school year, there are more than 63,000 students making use of ESAs across 11 states.<sup>3</sup>

Arizona became the first state in the country to implement an Education Savings Account (ESA) program in 2011. Last year, Arizona expanded its ESA program to serve any student in the state. In just the first year under expansion, the number of students utilizing the increased flexibility ESAs offer exploded, from about 12,000 in 2022 to more than 30,000 in 2023.<sup>4</sup>

While some express concern that choice programs like ESAs divert funding from public schools, this concern has not borne out in reality. Since the establishment of Arizona's ESA program, per-pupil public school funding, adjusted for inflation, has continually increased.<sup>5</sup> In fact, usage of ESAs is directly responsible for increasing the per-pupil funds available to students in the public school system. In FY 2019, for every ESA participant, local public schools received \$654, meaning that more than \$4.2 million in additional funding was made available to support public school students as a result of the state's ESA program.<sup>6</sup>

The ESA-like programs proposed in this hearing would function similarly. Because each proposal would dedicate only a portion (either half, or 90% of the state share) of the average statewide per-pupil cost to each ESA, there would naturally be considerable savings left over from each enrollee. This means that each enrollees' home district would keep some of the enrollee's per-pupil cost and use it to serve a smaller

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<sup>2</sup> [What is an Education Savings Account?](#) - EdChoice.org

<sup>3</sup> [School Choice Fast Facts and Statistics](#) | EdChoice.org

<sup>4</sup> [Arizona - Empowerment Scholarship Accounts](#) | EdChoice.org.

<sup>5</sup> [How Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Accounts Have Saved Students and Inspired a National Movement](#) | Goldwater Institute

<sup>6</sup> [The Public School Benefits of Education Savings Accounts](#) | Goldwater Institute

number of students. As they have in Arizona, ESAs in Maine would allow local public districts to increase their per-pupil spending with each successive enrollee.

The benefits of school choice cannot be overstated. To date, there have been 16 random assignment studies, the gold standard of empirical research, on how educational choice affects student academic achievement. Of those 16, 10 studies found statistically significant positive effects for participating students, while just two found negative effects, and four found neutral effects.<sup>7</sup> Choice helps families and raises student outcomes.

ESAs and tax-credit scholarship programs are not the only way to empower families to choose the best educational option for them, and allow them to pursue academic excellence. A 2017 analysis by the left-wing Center for American Progress found that “high-quality and accountable charters are successfully improving student achievement and closing the opportunity gap for low-income students of color through innovation within the public education system.”<sup>8</sup> Students who attend charter schools are noted to be more productive, well-rounded, community-minded, and better able to contribute as skilled workers—which are desperately needed in Maine.<sup>9</sup>

Charter schools in Maine are held back by unnecessary restrictions despite their demonstrated success and capacity to improve educational outcomes, particularly among special needs, poor and disadvantaged students. The permanent cap on the number of charter schools that can operate in Maine is nonsensical and limits even the publicly-available options students have, outside of the teachers’ union-run, government school system. LD 1741 would also cure this problem with Maine’s educational offerings.

Please **deem LDs 1741, 1798, 1838, 1841, and 1860 “Ought To Pass”** so that funding follows students, not opaque school systems which take their enrolled students for granted. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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<sup>7</sup> [The Data Prove Education Choice Is a Winner for Students and Taxpayers](#) | The Heritage Foundation

<sup>8</sup> [The Progressive Case for Charter Schools](#) | Center for American Progress

<sup>9</sup> [Legislative Task Force Says Maine’s Skilled Worker Shortage Has Reached Crisis Levels](#) | Maine Public