



Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

**Testimony
In Opposition to
LD 1974, An Act to Reauthorize Maine's New Markets Tax Credit Program
and
LD 2005, An Act to Eliminate the Aircraft Excise Tax
Before the Taxation Committee
January 9, 2024**

Senator Grohoski, Representative Perry, and other esteemed members of the Taxation Committee,

I am John (Jan) Kosinski, and I am here on behalf of the Maine Education Association (MEA) to testify in opposition to LD 1974, *An Act to Reauthorize Maine's New Markets Tax Credit Program* and LD 2005, *An Act to Eliminate the Aircraft Excise Tax*. The MEA represents 24,000 educators in the state of Maine, including teachers, certified professionals, and support staff in nearly every public school in the state as well as the faculty and other professionals in the University of Maine and Community College systems.

Both bills likely have merit, and we are not experts on the New Market Tax Credit program or the current state tax structure regarding aircraft. However, we are deeply concerned about the pressing needs of students and educators in our states, and solutions to these problems will require state aid and support. We are concerned about any additional tax breaks or tax credits at a time when our students, educators and schools desperately need help.

We remain elated that Governor Mills has maintained 55% state funding for public schools via the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) funding formula. It took the state nearly two decades to reach the 55% state funding demanded by voters in 2003, 2004 and then 2016. We appreciate the Governor's commitment to public schools, and we appreciate she has followed through on this commitment by funding 55% of the cost of public schools.

However, we are deeply concerned the 55% state funding of EPS is insufficient to address the major issues we are seeing.

First, across the state, Maine's public schools are facing critical **staffing shortages**. Teachers, social workers, ed techs, bus drivers and many other jobs are in high demand with little supply. These shortages have a major, negative impact on students and schools. Maine has adjusted certification requirements to encourage more people to enter the professions in our schools, but even the modification of standards has not solved the problem. We believe increasing salaries for teachers and wages for hourly school employees is critical to addressing the shortages. In fact, analysis and research from the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) reiterated the importance of increased compensation to address the shortages we are seeing in schools. The Legislature has two key bills designed to do just that. LD 1064, *An Act to Increase the Minimum Teacher Salary*, proposes to lift the

35 Community Drive, Augusta, ME 04330 | 1349 Broadway, Bangor, ME 04401
7 Hatch Drive, Suite 220, Caribou, ME 04736 | 29 Christopher Toppi Drive, South Portland ME 04106

207-622-5866 | 207-888-2070 fax | www.maineea.org

minimum teacher salary gradually over 4 years, from the current \$40,000 per year to \$50,000 per year. LD 974, *An Act to Establish Minimum Pay for Educational Technicians and Other School Support Staff*, as amended, proposes to increase the minimum wage for all hourly school support staff to 125% of the state minimum wage, and 150% of the state minimum wage for ed techs. We were disappointed these proposals were not included in the budget discussions last year, but we feel strongly we must make progress this session or the shortages will grow only more intense. Both proposals have immediate and long-term costs and schools will simply need state aid and support to help them raise wages and salaries for educators.

Second, teachers and other school employees across the state report a significant uptick in troubling behavior by students. The anecdotes are supported by the data from the Maine Department of Education:

Definitions:

Violent incident with physical injury: Violent Incident (with Physical Injury): Any physically violent incident with injury where one or more students, school personnel, or other persons on school grounds require professional medical attention.

Violent incident without physical injury: Incidents involving violent behavior or the threat of violent behavior but that did not result in the need for professional medical attention.

18/19 School Year

Violent Incident WITH Physical Injury – 447

Violent Incident WITHOUT Physical Injury – 1799

19/20 School Year (Despite an increase, please note, schools were remote March – June)

Violent Incident WITH Physical Injury – 550

Violent Incident WITHOUT Physical Injury – 1,806

20/21 School Year (Please note, most schools were hybrid/had modified schedules, etc.)

Violent Incident WITH Physical Injury – 128

Violent Incident WITHOUT Physical Injury 518

21/22 School Year

Violent Incident WITH Physical Injury – 690

Violent Incident WITHOUT Physical Injury – 2,293

(Data from the 22-23 school year has not been updated by the Maine Department of Education but we expect the figures to be even more troubling than prior years.)

Honestly, we have no concrete explanation for the behaviors we are seeing but we feel strongly this is an indicator of the need for greater behavioral and mental health support for students. Teachers and educators and students are seeing more challenging behaviors, and we must find ways to address the concerns we are seeing. One idea we support is LD 864, *An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools*. This bill proposes to include social workers and school psychologists in

the school funding formula – they are currently not included. The bill also proposes to reduce the student-to-school counselor ratio. This bill has a fiscal note of over \$80 million.

Lastly, and potentially related to the behaviors we are seeing, we are concerned about the Child Development Services program, or CDS. This state program is required to provide specialized services to kids between the ages of 0-5 – before they typically enter the public school system. I have worked at the MEA for 14 years and during this entire time CDS has been identified as woefully under-resourced and frankly, as it is currently constructed, not meeting the needs of kids. This is impacting the lives of kids and families. Specifically, when they do not receive the services they need and deserve, and the state is required to provide, it impacts their ability to enter school on par with their peers. Fixing the CDS program will require tremendous resources.

Failing to address these issues will have long term impacts on students, educators, public schools, and public education in Maine and all require significant state aid to address. We implore the Committee to be extremely cautious before approving additional tax breaks or tax credits for corporations and the wealthiest among us. While our state is on solid fiscal footing, kids and students and educators have real needs that only you, as policymakers, can address.

Thank you for your time and consideration and I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.