

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and other members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

Good afternoon and thank you for allowing me the time to address your committee. My name is John Soifer and I am a fairly recently retired special education teacher from Winslow Junior High and Skowhegan High. I am here today to testify in support of LD 955, 974, 1237 and 1314.

I began my career in education at the age of 45 as an ed tech to a special education program at Winslow Junior High. It was a career change I chose in order to help children by teaching after careers entirely in the private sector of owning and managing small and large businesses. One of the major obstacles in making the decision was trying to figure out, with my wife, how to support our family of ourselves and two boys in 7th and 9th grades on an ed techs salary at that time.

We made the commitment to my new career while I worked as an ed tech and took the necessary education courses to begin teaching as a special education teacher in 1995 for \$23,000. Fortunately for teachers, as a result of the hard work of legislators like yourselves, are doing much better today. Now no future Maine teacher will need to start with such financial challenges as a result of the statewide base salary you've supported.

Sadly, the enormously valuable but ignored/undervalued ed techs and other essential school personnel who work tirelessly to make the educational system work better for Maine students have been taken for granted and taken advantage of by the system; Until Now!

The education system is about people and families. That is why it is so sad and contradictory to what is said by the system when support staff are paid as poorly as they are. They are either at or barely above the poverty level whether they live with other wage-earners or alone.

These people are absolutely critical to the positive functioning of the educational system. The loss of ed techs in the system is another critical piece to retaining all the other educators as well. They are the unseen and minimally recognized backbone of the educational system supporting both regular and special educators who rely so critically on their integrity and work.

Special educators are both teachers and case managers. A little known fact is that they often do not actually have students on their caseloads in their classrooms. They rely on the ed techs to implement the students I.E.P.'s for them and keeping the special education case managers knowledgeable informed on how the students are doing.

As a system, we ask and expect so much from all these support personnel that help our children grow and learn to become strong, healthy and educated adults and positive members of our communities. However, we pay and treat them as disposable employees. You have the opportunity to change that situation now! I do understand you're considering several different bills to raise the wages. Please, please, please do something substantial and significant to help these educators and support personnel and thereby the educational system for Maine's students and our communities.

I thank you for your time and sincerely hope and trust you will rectify this wrong to these hard working, caring and intelligent people of Maine.

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