

Good Afternoon, my name is Stephanie Griffin and I am 35 years old. I have been an educator in Downeast Maine for 12 years. When I entered the field of education, I entered with the proverbial bright eyes and full of hope for my future. Growing up in Pennsylvania, I saw the respect that teachers had along with substantial benefits and retirement plans. While none of these things greatly impacted my decision to join the profession, they may certainly impact my choice to leave it. I never thought after teaching for over a decade I'd still be living paycheck to paycheck praying no more crisis occur because I just cannot afford another one and wondering how I would survive retirement. Nor did I think I'd have to consider obtaining a second job on top of my teaching job and other positions at the school just to survive. However, here I am...

Here I am, almost debt free, still struggling to make ends meet. Two years ago, due to an investment in the housing industry that paid off, I was able to eliminate my student loan debt. I live an understated life that should not be beyond my meager means. I drive an average but reliable car and have what most would consider these days a low mortgage payment. In many ways I was lucky and in many ways I made smart financial decisions. I thought that my responsible financial practices would ultimately lead me one day to being able to invest in my future retirement and live comfortably. But here I am.

Here I am wondering how much longer I can make it, wondering if it's in my financial best interest to throw in the towel and start over again. Here I am on the verge of becoming another statistic of teachers who walked away and never looked back. In my first year of teaching one of my students said to me before Christmas break as I planned my trip home to PA, he said, "You're not coming back are you?" I told him of course I am. I didn't understand why he asked at the time. Since then, I've watched countless educators enter the profession, heel turn and leave. Some not even lasting a year. I've watched others, after dedicating years of their lives, walk right out. Some leaving the state for greener pastures. Some leaving both the state and the profession. And here I am wondering if 12 years ago I made a mistake doubling down and coming back. But, here I am.

Here I am, 12 dedicated years in the Maine School system. I've been provided with opportunities to leave, I doubled down every time because I love teaching and I love Downeast Maine. But the financial burden has become almost too much to bear. In every way prices are increasing and I watch my bills rise exponentially while my salary negligibly. I received a small raise this year and watched it erased as my electric, internet, and cell phone bills all rose. Not to mention the hyperinflation of groceries. My car insurance was raised \$200 without any recorded incidents over the last several years. When I asked why, they stated inflation costs. Luckily for me I was able to shop around for a better insurance package. But here in Downeast Maine you don't get to shop around for much. There are limited internet, cell and electricity providers and very few stores to create competition and drive down prices. I've never been a proponent of minimum wage mandates. As a student of social studies and economics, I know the far reaching effects of these mandates. But, here I am.

As all other sectors raise wages that are then reflected in prices, and inflation rises, educator wages must also keep pace. Schools and the educators that make them effective have been asked repeatedly to take on more responsibilities, to do more for their communities, to offer more services. And yet, we have failed time and time again in providing them with the resources to do so. And now look, the most vital school resource, the educators themselves, where are they? I have been told all my life throughout sports, in jobs, etc., everyone is

replaceable.... Everyone is replaceable... How many openings in education exist across the state of Maine right now? How many of them have been open for over a year? Everyone is replaceable... Are they? Because I know of several positions that have remained opened for over a year in our local area alone. I know of positions being filled by unqualified individuals and while I am not here to knock the untraditional route to a career in education, I know that when that happens the quality of our children's education suffers to at least some degree. Is that a sacrifice you are willing to continue to make because you are going to have to. I am sure I am replaceable, but here I am.

Here I am just asking for a liveable wage in an economy that has become almost unlivable. I count myself lucky because I have been fiscally responsible. I carry little to no debt. I started a Roth when I was 25 and have made financially sound decisions most of my life. Not everyone has. And I think to myself it could be much worse, but if it was I would've thrown in the towel by now. I think to myself, I am in this position and struggling week to week, what about others who have families, who have larger medical bills, who have student loan debt, and who have just had life happen to them and are trying to survive. I know this is the story of many of my colleagues and teachers across the country. But we come in every day, we put on our very best for our students and we work to make our communities better places day in and day out and then we go home and we try to figure out how we will make it another day. And yet, everyday, without fail we show up and say Here I am... until that one day when maybe we will not.

These bills before you today are imperative in sustaining the quality of our education systems in Maine. Not only are they vital to attracting new young recruits to schools across the state, they are vital to maintaining the current workforce. If the state cannot afford to invest in education I hope you can afford to invest in other sectors because an uneducated populace becomes a dependent one. If schools cannot function and educate students, if they cannot continue to provide the proper services needed to their communities those will be real ripple effects for generations upon generations to come. Do you think the State of Maine can afford that?