

Testimony neither for nor against LD 2214, "An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

Arthur Phillips, Economic Policy Analyst  
February 21, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs; and Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs. My name is Arthur Phillips, and I am an analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy. I am here to testify neither for nor against LD 2214.

We applaud the governor's proposal to maintain Maine's commitment to funding 55 percent of K-12 education costs. Ensuring all schools have the state resources they need is a critical component to ensuring our children receive the education they need and deserve to thrive in the future.

However, we are very concerned that the proposed supplemental budget does not include provisions to raise the pay of teachers and education support staff. These public servants form the backbone of our schools and make our communities safer, healthier, and of course better educated. Unfortunately, these positions have been underpaid for years, resulting in ongoing school staffing shortages among teachers and support staff.<sup>i</sup> This requires immediate attention so we can count on having the best teachers possible in our schools.

This is especially important in a strong labor market like we have today. With workers in high demand, it is more important than ever for public education to compete with private sector employers. As part of our annual State of Working Maine report, we heard from an ed tech in Oxford County who said some of the high school students work at Walmart and make more than she does, even after 20 years serving the school district. She reports that ed techs in her district have a starting wage just four cents above the minimum wage and, as a result, they do not have sufficient staff to correctly support students.<sup>ii</sup>

While many educators are falling behind entry-level workers in the private sector, they're also well behind their public-school peers in neighboring states. According to a recent report from the Maine Education Association, the average starting teacher salary in Maine is more than \$3,700 below the national average. Maine teachers' average starting salary is lower than every state in New England and nearly \$5,000 below the New England average.

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Meanwhile, the average support staff annual wage ranks fifth in New England, nearly \$4,000 below the regional average.<sup>iii</sup>

We encourage members of both committees to seriously consider the long-term ramifications of underpaying our educators. Current legislation, LD 974 and LD 1064, would increase pay for education support staff and teachers, respectively. We hope you will make this a priority as you contemplate amendments to LD 2214.

Thank you and I welcome any questions you may have.

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<sup>i</sup> Lana Cohen, "School year in Maine begins with familiar staffing shortages," Portland Press Herald, August 27, 2023, available at <https://www.pressherald.com/2023/08/27/school-year-begins-with-familiar-staffing-shortages/>

<sup>ii</sup> In the words of workers, December 2023, available at <https://www.mecep.org/blog/in-the-words-of-workers-kim/>

<sup>iii</sup> Maine Education Association, Raise the Pay for Maine's Educators: A solution to our staffing shortage, available at <https://maineea.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Raise-the-Pay-for-Maine-FINAL.pdf>