

Feb. 7, 2025

**Senator Rotundo, Senator Rafferty, Representative Gattine, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Ryan Soucie, my hometown is Brunswick, and I am a School Counselor at Scarborough High School. I am writing today to testify in support of the portion of LD210 that funds the Maine Free College Program and general operating costs at the Maine Community College System.**

As a School Counselor at the secondary level for the past fifteen years, and former undergraduate and graduate student, I understand the value of post-secondary education. I have first hand experience with the level of pressure and emphasis that is placed on many of our graduating high school seniors to attend college and earn a higher level degree. For many families though, the rising costs associated with obtaining a college degree has proven to be a significant barrier to achieving such status. That is why, as an educator with two young children of my own, I submit to you today my support of the portion of LD210 that would continue to provide a free Community College education to graduating seniors in the State of Maine. Since 2020, approximately 150 graduating seniors from Scarborough High School have benefited from the free tuition program. Last year's graduating class from Scarborough High School, the Class of 2024, saw the largest percentage of students take advantage of this program, with 20% of the graduates transitioning to a Maine Community College campus. This data shows that even within one of the more economically affluent communities in Maine, the idea of providing an opportunity for students to earn college credits and a potential Associates degree without negatively impacting their financial well being is a popular choice for many. And while I do not have hard data to support my next statement, I would be willing to bet that anecdotally many of these students continue on to 4-year public colleges & universities, likely within the University of Maine system, upon successful completion of two years at a Maine Community College.

In addition to our graduating seniors, we also have a cohort of students each year that enroll in the Spring Ahead program at Southern Maine Community College, allowing them to be dually enrolled in both high school and college courses during the spring semester of their senior year. The Spring Ahead program has been a tremendous opportunity for our students and has allowed them to earn college credits tuition free while still enrolled as a public high school student. The positive impact that such a program has had on all of my students cannot be overstated.

I thank you for your time and consideration today.