

DATE: February 26, 2025
TO: Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Chief External & Governmental Affairs Officer
samantha.warren@maine.edu / 207-632-0389
RE: ***LD 98, An Act to Include School Counselors in the Educators for Maine Program***

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs: **The University of Maine System (UMS) is the state's leading provider of certified school counselors.**

Current State school counselor certification requires an individual to have attained a master's or doctoral degree in counseling through an accredited program approved to prepare school counselors or that offers aligned coursework. **Through the University of Southern Maine (USM), our System provides the only such public program in the state** with 60 graduate students currently pursuing [a Master of Science in Counseling degree with a concentration in School Counseling](#).

USM's program is nationally accredited, informed by its close connections to the field and through an advisory board, and has a strong record of preparing graduates for school counseling employment and success. More than half of its students attain the State's conditional school counseling certification and work as full-time school counselors during their field placement experiences, and almost **all students secure employment in Maine schools before graduation.**

Through this program and our Systemwide partnerships with Maine's PK-12 districts, UMS is acutely aware of the critical need for highly qualified counselors in our state's schools — especially in rural regions. Even though **USM's program is the state's most affordable — costing about 40% less per credit hour for in-state students than the private option,** we believe that extending some form of financial assistance to aspiring school counselors, whether through scholarships or loan forgiveness, would make the required advanced degree more accessible. Doing so would likely result in more people pursuing school counseling careers instead of private practice and help address these severe shortages for the benefit of Maine students, families, schools and communities.

Our System is also the State's leading provider of classroom-ready teachers, having awarded nearly 4,000 education degrees or certificates in the past five years. The FAME-administered Educators for Maine program has been an essential resource for recruiting students into our educator preparation programs and then retaining them to work in our state's schools or childcare settings after graduation.

We know the existing funding for Educators for Maine is not meeting demand and are sensitive to putting further pressure on the program. If Maine is to address the workforce needs of its public schools and better serve its PK-12 students with highly qualified professionals, the funding for the Educators for Maine program should be expanded as should loan forgiveness eligibility to aspiring school counselors and other essential school personnel.

Having highly qualified school counselors in a district directly supports student success by providing essential academic, social-emotional, and career guidance, ensuring students receive the interventions and resources they need to thrive. Counselors also play a vital role in connecting families with community resources that reduce barriers to learning, such as mental health services, food assistance, and housing support. Additionally, they collaborate with teachers, administrators, and community partners to create a support network for students, reducing the burdens on school staff and mitigating burnout.

On behalf of the students and alumni of USM's Counselor Education program, we appreciate the sponsor and supporters of LD 98 for their commitment to strengthening pipelines into this essential profession and supporting school counselors.