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February 25th, 2025

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

Please let the text below serve as my testimony in support of L.D. 34: “An Act to Increase the Minimum Salary for Teachers,” scheduled for hearing on February 26th, 2025.

At a basic level, the combination of formal education, internship, and licensing exam that is necessary to become a teacher makes the occupation part of the professional class. The education and training that teachers undertake is pivotal to maintaining teacher quality, but there is an economic divide right at the outset. In many cases, prospective teachers assume significant student debt to pay for their education and training, which makes their financial situation and long-term place in the field more tenuous than peers who come from wealthier households, placing those less wealthy teachers at a significant disadvantage. And what is more, the continuing education and professional development expectations likewise require significant time, effort, and money that may not be subsidized by the employing district in part or at all, depending on the employment contract. All of this makes compensation a prominent barrier to teachers entering and staying in the classroom at every level and in every discipline.

If teaching is in fact a professional job with demands comparable other fields, then its average compensation package, including salary, must be competitive with other comparable fields in order to address those economic realities. According to a 2022 [NEA poll](#), 78% of teachers surveyed said that low pay is a “serious” issue in the profession, with 48% of that total stating that low pay is a “very serious” issue. That same poll indicated that 96% of those surveyed said that raising teacher salaries would be important to addressing teacher burnout. A related 2023 survey by the [Economic Policy Institute](#) that was based on United States Bureau of Labor Statistics data showed that the teacher compensation penalty relative to other professions in 2023 was 26.6%, or 73.4 cents on the dollar. That penalty is a disparity that has lifechanging implications, potentially dictating whether teachers are able to pay down their student debt, buy homes in the communities they serve, or prepare for a stable and dignified retirement.

L.D. 34 seeks to close that early-career pay gap and address many of those issues. The bill's initial adjustments between 2026 and 2030 that will be subsidized by state monies are critical to recruiting the next generation of teachers and helping districts big and small adjust their budgeting practices toward being sustainable. Then, the bill's cost-of-living adjustments made annually in 2030 and thereafter are essential to keeping pay competitive and keeping district budgets aligned with predictable salary costs year-over-year. The two-pronged approach to L.D. 34 is prudent in the short-term and long-term, and the bill's bipartisan sponsorship illustrates that the legislators of Maine know that this is an urgent and important step in a positive direction.

Moreover, L.D. 34 should help to remedy disparities between early-career compensation in different districts and regions. Pre-service and novice teachers would have greater flexibility in seeking out positions that suit their talents regardless of whether the district is rural or urban, small or large. Veteran teachers would feel less pressure to move southward in search of greater lifetime earnings because they would already have an equitable financial foundation. Teachers from out-of-state would be better able to justify relocating to Maine and capitalizing on our outstanding local control districts, curricular freedom, committed colleagues, and community-oriented families and students if they can expect compensation that is competitive to their home state. All of these changes would help fill teaching positions with the best possible candidates from the widest variety of qualified applicant pools.

Education is an essential public service, and teachers are an important pillar in that service. We must do whatever we can to recruit and retain teachers. The Maine Department of Education's [#TeachMaine](#) framework emphasizes that fact; the State of Maine's [Economic Development Strategy](#) depends on that fact. Every child in every classroom deserves a qualified teacher, and L.D. 34 presents one important step in support of that goal.

I urge you to vote in favor of L.D. 34 and thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Joseph Hennessey, MEd
2018 Piscataquis County Teacher of the Year
2019 Maine Teacher of the Year
2020 National University Teacher of the Year