

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and other esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Zach Wentworth, and I am an aspiring educator at the University of Maine, living and student-teaching in Orono. I am in my final year of my undergraduate career and am on track to obtain my Maine teacher certification in secondary social studies. I am writing to express my strong support for LD 34, An Act to Increase the Minimum Salary for Teachers.

Just four short years ago, in my senior year of high school, I wrote college application essays about my passion for education and my dreams of returning to serve communities in rural Maine, like Calais, where I grew up. Now, as I approach the completion of my degree and prepare to begin my career, the harsh realities of the current teaching profession have set in.

Currently, teachers in Calais earn about the minimum salary of \$40,000 a year. With one bedroom apartment's rent over \$1,200 a month, already high grocery prices continuing to increase, student loan payments, and the laundry list of basic living expenses, it is difficult to see how I could sustain myself on this salary, in fact I do not know how I would sustain this salary without multiple part-time jobs throughout the year. The current minimum salary is not reflective of the dedication and hard work required of educators, and simply does not align with the costs of living in Maine. Despite my passion for education, I simply cannot afford to be a teacher in rural Maine. You could say my dream is feeling a bit crushed.

As a result, I have made the difficult decision to delay my entrance into the teaching field. Instead, I will attend graduate school, taking on part-time jobs that will allow me to make more than I would as a full-time teacher, with the hope that in two years something will change and I will be able to enter the profession. It is incredibly disheartening to me that my desire to serve my community as an educator is being delayed because of low pay, and I hope in two years the situation has changed.

Even more concerning is the reality that I am not the only one; many of my peers at the University of Maine are choosing to not enter the education profession entirely, not because they don't want to teach, but because they need a livable wage. Instead, they are turning to careers in fields like technology, business, and law where the pay far surpasses the current 40k minimum. While these fields may offer better pay, our passion is education, our degrees are in education and I know I would far prefer to stay in education and make a meaningful impact. However, sometimes basic needs have to take precedence over dreams, but it is my opinion teaching should not have to be just a dream, it should be a career with a livable wage that can be a reality.

The minimum salary increase proposed in LD 34 is vital to make teaching a more accessible profession. With this increase, we can lower the barriers that are preventing not only me but many of my peers from entering the field. Over the past three years, I have witnessed firsthand the toll that staffing shortages have taken on students, educators and communities alike. As a substitute teacher I filled the roles of vacant staff 3 days a week on days I didn't have class for 4 months straight. Students deserve consistent staffing and highly trained educators accelerating their learning, and too often this isn't the case. These shortages directly affect the quality of education students in Maine receive and I believe we can no longer afford to not raise the minimum salary and let this issue worsen.

By increasing the minimum salary for teachers, both the teacher shortage and the quality of education in our state could be addressed. It will make teaching a more viable career option for passionate individuals like myself, who are committed to serving Maine's students. I ask you to please give me the opportunity to earn a living wage and fulfill my dream of serving rural communities and their students by increasing the minimum teaching salary.

Thank you for your time and consideration, I appreciate all the work you do for the people of Maine.

Zachary Wentworth