

Tyler Backus
OAKLAND
LD 501

Testimony in Support of LD 501
26February2025
Tyler Backus

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,
My name is Tyler Backus, I am here today to express my strong support for LD 501, which aims to address the disparities and funding inequities present within Maine's education system, as highlighted in the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) funding formula.

Lyndon B. Johnson once stated, "to bring better education to millions of disadvantaged youth who need it most... to provide incentives for those who wish to learn at every stage along the road to learning." Unfortunately, Maine is falling short of this vision. An analysis by Edbuild on 2014 expenditures revealed that Maine was one of 27 states demonstrating regressive state and local funding between its wealthiest and poorest districts. Since that time, there have been minimal changes in the funding formula, perpetuating inequities in educational opportunities for our students.

For instance, in 2025, Falmouth, one of the wealthiest districts, has an elementary EPS rate of \$8,826 and a secondary rate of \$9,312. In contrast, Lewiston, among the poorest districts, receives \$7,480 and \$7,966, respectively. Even with weighted adjustments, Lewiston's per-pupil allocation is only 8.6% higher than Falmouth's, despite significant differences in student needs:

- Lewiston's poverty rate stands at 69.15%, compared to 2.87% in Falmouth.
- Lewiston's bilingual rate is 30.45%, while Falmouth's is just 1.35%.
- Lewiston raises only \$2,041.74 per pupil locally, whereas Falmouth raises \$9,224.67.

This stark contrast in local revenue generation and state funding exacerbates inequities in educational opportunities and student outcomes. Districts capable of raising more local funds consistently spend more on instruction per pupil, resulting in higher academic performance on state assessments.

Moreover, the EPS formula fails to account for the additional costs associated with educating disadvantaged students. As a result, districts like Lewiston, with higher rates of poverty and bilingual students, struggle to provide the necessary resources to support their students' learning needs.

In addition to the base EPS rates, disparities are evident in teacher salary allocations. For example, Falmouth receives \$88,826.70 per teaching EPS FTE, whereas Lewiston receives only \$68,238.11, despite both districts drawing from the same pool of educators. This discrepancy arises from differences in average teacher experience and education levels, highlighting a cycle where wealthier districts attract more experienced teachers, perpetuating educational inequities.

Several changes could significantly improve the funding model's fairness and effectiveness, including:

- 1.Adjusting the Weights and Calculations in Section 2: As seen in Tennessee's funding model, an additional 25% allocation for each disadvantaged student and an extra 5% for each student attending a Title I school would better reflect the needs of students in economically disadvantaged communities.
- 2.Updating the Poverty Measurement Methodology: Maine could adopt a model similar to Colorado's, utilizing multiple methods to determine poverty rates and allocating funding based on the higher of the two rates to ensure adequate support for students in need.
- 3.Reviewing and Updating Special Education Funding: The current model has been reviewed multiple times without significant updates. Implementing a system similar to Tennessee's, which uses different weights and alternative indicators, would enhance equity in special education funding.

4.Revising Inflation Adjustments: The current cap on inflation rates fails to reflect real-world cost increases. In FY2024, the EPS formula recognized only a 2.2% inflation rate while actual inflation was over 8%, resulting in a \$200 million annual shortfall. Correcting this would significantly improve funding for districts like Lewiston, potentially increasing allocations by \$6.7 million annually. To achieve educational equity and realize Lyndon B. Johnson's vision, it is crucial for Maine to reform the EPS funding formula to better reflect the needs of disadvantaged students and the communities that support them. I urge the legislature to support [Bill Number/Title] and implement these necessary changes to ensure every student in Maine has an equal opportunity to succeed. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions and provide additional information as needed.

Sincerely,
Tyler Backus
Oakland, Maine