

Joseph Fagnant
Houlton
LD 420

Dear Committee Members,

I have reached out to the sponsors of the bill and would like to also provide testimony on LD 420, funding for the Carleton Project. Alternative pathways are important for our Southern Aroostook Region. Over the past few years, our local districts have moved away from the Carleton Project and invested in our own regional alternative education programming through the Summit Academy, and a newly formed Transitions Learning Center. Both of these programs are housed in the Summit Academy Building in Houlton, and as the Executive Director of the Southern Aroostook Area Regional Service Center (SAARSC) and the Superintendent of RSU 29, who is the fiscal agent of SAARSC, I have been involved in overseeing both programs.

As a former adult education director, I know students don't succeed in traditional settings. I also know other public alternative programs in Aroostook County are doing amazing work. I started the Transitions Learning Center in 2024 for even more flexibility in alternative programming, truly based on my experiences of working with youth and adults in adult education. You should also know that alternative programs exist in Presque Isle, Caribou, and the Saint John Valley with Caribou and Fort Kent also running alternative options under the umbrella of their adult education programs.

There are various reasons we moved away from the Carleton project as a region, the major one being it is a private school. In the past, it could not give out a diploma as it was a limited purpose private school and was not approved by Maine DOE to award diplomas.

The SAARSC invested in Summit Academy when the service center started in 2019, with enrollment availability to 40 students. It is housed on the second floor of the Summit building, with students eligible to participate coming from Houlton, Hodgdon, Southern Aroostook, and Katahdin schools.

At Summit Academy students are on their own pathway where they are taking courses in many academic offerings in a smaller setting with two certified teachers, assisted by two certified educational technicians. They also have access to classes at public schools, participate in Region Two CTE, work with counselors, work with ACAP career counselors, and have community service days. Credits are awarded through Summit back to the sending school, where that student earns a diploma from their original school.

The newly formed Transitions Learning Center (TLC) is housed on the bottom floor of the Summit Building, under the auspices of Houlton Hodgdon Adult & Community Education. It is truly a program within a program, where students are working with staff to finish high school in a more flexible way. All students must be in one of three pathways including workforce preparation, college coursework, or Region Two CTE enrolled. Students can work and go to school, including attending late afternoon or evening programs. Everything is individualized as far as their pacing and pathways. Diplomas are awarded through their sending schools. Our enrollment is smaller with five active students, but we have an open enrollment in this new program, including options to take classes through the summer if so desired. Our adult education program is also a partner with Northern Maine Community College, which is a great direct line to college courses in one building.

Our area schools knew there was a need to be more efficient and consolidated services under the regional service center, also known in the state as Educational Service Centers. We utilize funding provided by our communities and the state to work collaboratively to support students in nontraditional settings. We have certified teachers on site, and certified administration oversees the programming. We are held to high standards and accountable to our board of directors and all the school boards in the region, including conducting certified financial audits.

We feel our programming in our alternative settings does work well for our students, providing certified teachers working directly face to face with students, plus flexible opportunities for students to find a pathway that works for them. We also provide transportation, food, counseling, and special education services. We would gladly look at more funding for alternative education and would appreciate any further discussion on how we can increase and capitalize on the funding model that already exists.

In closing, I wanted to share a story. There is a student who will be graduating soon, who just a year ago, was ready to drop out of school. In my connections with my team at Houlton High School and my staff at Summit Academy, we created a special program for her. Her passion is music and she wants to be a music teacher. As a former music teacher, I was so excited for her to find her way. She is doing fantastic at Summit Academy, is a teacher's assistant at the Southside School (grades 3-6) in Houlton as part of her programming, takes music classes at Houlton High School, works with the music department to assist in various ensembles, and has been accepted to the University of Maine for music education. Summit allows for flexibility of scheduling and working with the public schools to give her a nontraditional secondary school experience. Our entire team of educators, counselors, and alternative teachers came together to provide her with the support she needed to be successful. That is what we do on a daily basis and there are many more stories out there.

We are doing great work in our schools, and would truly love the funding you are looking to put towards nontraditional schools to be supporting public education that is doing this work everyday. Thank you for your time and efforts in Augusta and feel free to reach out to me anytime.

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