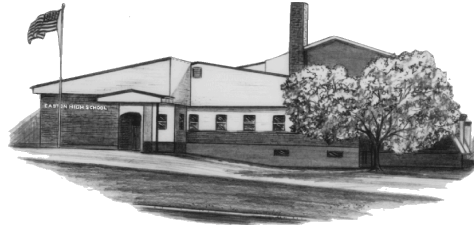


# Easton Junior/Senior High School

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TO: Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

FROM: Easton School Department

RE: In Opposition of LD 512: An Act to Provide Educational Opportunities for Students in Secondary Schools with 200 or Fewer Students

Date: March 12, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Laura Hunter and I am the principal at Easton Jr/Sr High School. I am testifying as a concerned constituent and stakeholder in our local educational system to express my opposition to LD 512 as currently written.

While I appreciate the goal of increasing educational opportunities for students in small secondary schools, I have significant concerns about both the feasibility and the potential unintended consequences of this bill. My primary concerns include:

## **1. Fiscal Responsibility and Resource Allocation:**

The proposal, as drafted, may impose an unsustainable financial burden on local communities and the state. Redirecting funds or creating new programs without a robust analysis of long-term costs risks diverting resources from other critical educational initiatives. In particular, schools that already struggle with limited budgets could face additional challenges in meeting new administrative and programmatic requirements.

## **2. Equity and Implementation Challenges:**

Small schools serve a diverse range of communities with unique local needs. A one-size-fits-all statewide mandate does not adequately address the differing circumstances among rural, suburban, and economically disadvantaged areas. Rather than expanding opportunities uniformly, the bill may inadvertently widen existing disparities by providing benefits that are easier to implement in some communities than in others.

### **3. Risk of a Downward Spiral:**

The loss of students could trigger a vicious cycle. Fewer students mean reduced funding, forcing us to cut programs, staff, or extracurricular activities. These reductions would make our school less appealing, prompting more students to leave and further eroding our resources. In Aroostook County, where most secondary schools have fewer than 200 students, this bill could destabilize multiple districts, pushing them toward closure and accelerating the decline of rural education.

### **4. Disruption to Budgeting and Staffing**

The bill mandates that parents notify us by April 1st of their intent to transfer and provide an acceptance letter by May 1st. This timeline creates significant uncertainty in enrollment numbers, making it nearly impossible to plan budgets, staffing, or course offerings accurately. We might overstaff in anticipation of retaining students, only to face last-minute cuts—or understaff and scramble to adjust. Such instability undermines our ability to provide a consistent, high-quality education.

### **5. Devastation to Rural Communities:**

Small schools like ours are the lifeblood of rural communities in Aroostook County. We employ residents, host community events, and attract families to the area. If this bill weakens or closes schools by driving students away, it could devastate our local economy, lower property values, and erode the social fabric that binds us together. Families may leave the region entirely, hastening the population decline already challenging rural Maine.

### **6. Potential for Adverse Selection**

The bill does not specify criteria for acceptance by receiving schools, raising the risk that they might selectively enroll high-achieving or low-cost students while rejecting those with greater needs, such as special education students. This adverse selection could leave small schools with a higher proportion of students requiring more resources, further straining our budgets and widening achievement gaps.

### **7. Local Control and Flexibility:**

Local education agencies possess the expertise and intimate knowledge of their students' needs. Centralized programs may undermine local control by imposing standardized criteria that do not reflect the particular challenges and strengths of individual school districts. Effective educational reform should empower local leaders to design solutions that are tailored to their community rather than applying a prescriptive model across the state.

I would also like to add that small schools can be and are successful. In Easton we have students going to ivy league schools, placing in competitions against class B schools, and continue to be a top performing school across the state.

## **Conclusion**

LD 512, while well-intentioned, could be catastrophic for small schools in Aroostook County and beyond. It threatens our financial stability, educational quality, and community vitality, all while failing to address the root challenges facing rural education. I urge the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee to reject this bill and instead pursue policies that bolster small schools, ensuring they remain vibrant hubs of learning and community life. Our students, staff, and families deserve no less.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I remain available should you require further details regarding my perspective.

Sincerely,

Laura A. Hunter