

DATE: March 13, 2025
TO: Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
FROM: Nicholas Fisichelli, PhD. Schoodic Institute at Acadia National Park
RE: LD 895, An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Plueker, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry: My name is Nicholas Fisichelli. As President and CEO with Schoodic Institute at Acadia National Park, a nonprofit science and education organization, I am submitting testimony in support of LD 895.

The Schoodic Education Adventure (SEA) program is our 3-day, 2-night outdoor school program for middle school classes from all counties in Maine (>75% from Hancock and Washington Counties). Immersed in the beauty of Acadia National Park on the spectacular coast of Maine, SEA students have transformative experiences that shape their lifetime connection with Maine's outdoor heritage. As a non-profit science and education organization and National Park Service partner, our programs provide opportunities for students to engage in authentic science directly connected to the evolving stewardship of the natural resources that sustain our coastal communities and the state of Maine.

The network of outdoor schools in Maine today reaches thousands of kids every year, but this amounts to less than a quarter of the students in a single grade. Thus, most students are left inside, disconnected from the learning that can happen beyond the walls of a classroom, disconnected from their outdoor heritage, and disconnected from career pathways in forestry, farming, fishing and other outdoor industries. This disconnect is especially true for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, kids who are not shown the path forward towards meaningful outdoor careers within their own communities. We can do better.

LD 895 is needed to ensure that every student has an outdoor school opportunity during one grade of their school years. Over the long term, every student would have an opportunity during one year between 4th and 8th grades to attend an outdoor school. Participating local school districts determine the appropriate grade and partner with an outdoor school of their choosing.

There is a thriving network of outdoor schools in Maine poised to scale up and work with all school districts and all Maine students. This is a model that outdoor schools have been refining for decades. The outdoor schools bring private individual, foundation, and corporate support to supplement, but not replace, state funding. This includes teacher development and support, and building relationships with school districts to facilitate outdoor school experiences.

Thank you for your continued support of our outdoor heritage and the next generation of outdoor leaders.