

Testimony in Support of LD 895

An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program

Senator Bennett, Representative Brennan, and honorable members of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

My name is Bo Jespersen, and I am writing in strong support of LD 895, An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important bill.

Thirty years ago, I began my journey in outdoor education as a student at the University of Southern Maine. During that time, I spent two transformative years immersed in the outdoor education program at Wolfe's Neck Island. The experience was nothing short of life-changing. I learned about leadership, resilience, teamwork, and developed a deep appreciation for the natural world. Those formative years instilled in me a respect for Maine's environment and a belief in the power of learning through direct experience in nature.

After college, I became a carpenter, a trade that kept me connected to working with my hands and to the land in its own way. Even though my professional path took me in a different direction, the lessons I learned during my time in outdoor education never left me. They helped shape who I am today—someone who values hard work, stewardship of our environment, and community connection. Today, I am proud to say I am pursuing a master's degree in clinical social work at the University of Maine in Orono. My current policy class gave me the opportunity to focus my project on LD 895, a bill that I believe holds incredible potential for Maine students.

As a future social worker and a lifelong advocate for the outdoors, I see firsthand how many of our youth are struggling. Rates of anxiety, depression, and social isolation are rising. One contributing factor is the significant increase in screen time. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children ages 8-12 spend an average of 4-6 hours per day on screens, while teens can spend up to 9 hours. Excessive screen time has been linked not only to mental health concerns but also to physical health issues like increasing rates of myopia (nearsightedness). The World Health Organization has reported that myopia has nearly doubled in children over the last 50 years, primarily attributed to less time spent outdoors. As adults, this is happening on our watch, and I want to do all I can to redirect this troublesome trend in our youth.

At the same time, opportunities for unstructured outdoor play and immersive nature experiences have drastically declined. Research shows that children today spend half as much time outdoors as their parents did. A National Trust study even coined the term "nature deficit disorder" to describe the impact of this trend on physical and emotional well-being. Outdoor education programs like the one proposed in LD 895 can help reverse these trends by giving students meaningful, structured opportunities to connect with nature, develop life skills, and improve their physical and mental health.

I have personally experienced the lifelong benefits of immersive outdoor education. It teaches problem-solving, collaboration, and resilience in a way no classroom can replicate. This program could be life-changing for many Maine students, particularly those from communities with limited access to nature-based experiences. LD 895 would ensure that all students have equitable access to an outdoor school experience, where they can learn, grow, and gain a sense of place and responsibility for our state's unique environment.

We are at a pivotal moment. Maine has the opportunity to lead the way in restoring a connection between our young people and the natural world. Investing in programs like Outdoor School for All Maine Students will support academic learning and foster healthier, happier, and more resilient children.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I urge you to support LD 895 and allow Maine students to benefit from the transformative power of outdoor education—just as I did thirty years ago.

Sincerely,
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LD 895

Good morning. Thank you for taking up this important bill. I could not make the hearing in person, but I hope this written testimony supporting LD 895 will make it to the right people. Thank you.