



Testimony Presented by The Ecology School in Support of LD 550
Thursday, March 13, 2025 @ 1pm - An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based
and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools

Good afternoon Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry Committee:

My name is Drew Dumsch, and I am a resident of Saco, Maine and President & CEO of The Ecology School, a nonprofit outdoor school and environmental living & learning center located at the historic 313-acre River Bend Farm on the Saco River in rural southwest Saco. I am also a member of the Maine Outdoor School for All Network which is a state-wide collaboration of experiential learning centers offering multi-day overnight programs for students and classroom teachers throughout Maine. For 26 years The Ecology School has had the honor to work with thousands of Maine students and their classroom teachers to support their experiential learning in the curriculum areas of agriculture, conservation, forestry, environmental science and sustainability.

LD 550— An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools— will support innovative experiential education for more Maine students and ensure that Maine K-12 schools increase opportunities to partner with Maine nonprofit education providers of farm, forestry and conservation education programs. Given this history and legacy of our state's natural resources and the amazing opportunities that learning outside provides to Maine students, I'm excited that this bill will support more children learning where their food comes from and even learning to grow their own food. Understanding the importance of agriculture, forestry and conservation to Maine's economy and workforce is an important outcome of supporting more agriculture-based, experiential education for Maine students, classroom teachers and schools.

LD 550 will also support the Maine Farm & Sea to School Network, an amazing experiential education initiative that brings together partners such as UMaine Cooperative Extension, Maine Agriculture in the Classroom, Maine School Garden Network, USDA, and the Maine Department of Education to convene a summer institute that benefits entire school districts with experiential education training for teachers, students, school administrators and school food service staff. The Ecology School has been honored to host the first three Maine Farm and Sea to School Institutes at our River Bend Farm campus and we look forward to hosting the next Institute this summer.

I also appreciate the experiential learning piece of this bill because I've been working on the LD 895 Outdoor School legislation that you held a hearing on this morning. As someone who has been active for years with the Maine Environmental Education Association, I can attest to the many strong partnerships between public schools and nonprofit experiential education providers that exist throughout the state. Unfortunately, given current school budgets, funding for experiential agriculture-based learning is limited even though studies have shown that the health, learning and behavior of children all improve through outdoor focused, hands-on learning in gardens and farms.

I strongly urge this Committee to consider and pass all legislation that supports getting our children more experiential learning in agriculture, conservation and forestry.

Thank you,

Drew Dumsch