

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF

L.D. 628

AN ACT REGARDING ELIGIBILITY TO APPLY FOR A DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION DIPLOMA

March 18, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Eileen King, the deputy executive director of Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and Maine School Superintendents Association in support of L.D. 628, which provides a critical pathway for fourth-year high school students who have experienced a significant interruption in their education to receive a Department of Education diploma.

We have seen firsthand the many challenges that students face during their educational journey. Just as adults encounter unexpected hardships—such as serious illness, homelessness, family crises, economic instability, or other life-altering events—our students are not immune to such struggles.

For some, these challenges become barriers that prevent them from meeting the traditional requirements for high school graduation within their school administrative unit.

L.D. 628 recognizes the reality that education is not always a straight path. By allowing the Commissioner of Education to approve a state-issued diploma for students facing significant interruption, this bill provides a necessary safety net for students who, through no fault of their own, find themselves unable to complete a conventional graduation track but are still committed to their future success.

Importantly, a student who receives a Department of Education diploma must still meet all of Maine's graduation requirements, in English, math, social studies, science and art. Students are not exempt from these requirements and must provide evidence of their proficiency in these subjects.

In addition, the legislature has set narrowly tailored uses for when a student may apply for this diploma, ensuring that it is only used for educational disruptions. Students must have experienced very specific circumstances, such as:

- Homelessness;
- Foster care placement;
- Placement in an interim program such as a youth development center;
- Enrollment in three schools or more over the course of a single school year.

Any of these situations can be traumatic for a student or family, causing substantial interruptions to their learning. Schools already work diligently to help these students catch up, providing extra tutoring, learning

time, and other accommodations. L.D. 628 provides an alternative pathway that still ensures academic learning and success.

It is also important to note that this bill does not lower standards for students or schools. In fact, a key part of this policy is a requirement that administrators and teachers work closely with a student, their family, previous school districts, and other agencies to create a “Work Recognition Plan.” According to statute, this plan must include:

- A. A summary of the student’s achievement relative to the appropriate learning results;
- B. A compilation of full and partial credits and other achievement recognitions earned;
- C. An identification of any gaps between the student’s achievement and the achievement typical of the student’s same-age peers; and
- D. A plan for maximizing the student’s progress and closing identified gaps.

Each of these plans is individualized for the student and situation and ensures that a student still leaves high school prepared for the world ahead.

L.D. 628 acknowledges that students who have encountered exceptional circumstances deserve a chance to move forward, whether that means entering the workforce, pursuing higher education, or contributing to their communities.

I urge the committee to support this legislation and help ensure that every Maine student has a pathway to success.