

To the members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Autumn Baldwin, and I am writing to provide you with my written testimony for your consideration on two bills impacting The Maine School of Science and Mathematics. The bills LD787 and LD1011 would be of great benefit to not only MSSM, but also to the State of Maine as a whole. I will give you just one small example of how passing both of these bills can change the lives of students across this state.

My son, Nikolias Theriault, is a senior at The Maine School of Science and Mathematics. This school has changed the course of Niko's life. Nikolias was identified as a gift student in Kindergarten. During the two years he attended Fiddlehead Charter School in Gray, Niko began to dream of attending MSSM. Passionate about all things science, technology, engineering, and math - he was drawn to the challenge this school provided in the fields he was the most interested in. From fourth grade on, Niko focused on doing whatever it took to attend this school. I supported him in every way that I could - all while being fearful that although it was his dream, and the tuition would be covered as Maine residents, without financial assistance - how hard we worked would not have mattered.

I am a seventh year educator in this state, and without financial assistance, I would not have been able to afford to pay for Nikolias' room and board. His father was out of his life for many years, addicted to drugs and in and out of jail. I did not receive any child support and as a single mother with two children, on a teacher's salary - Niko attending MSSM seemed unattainable. I told Niko I would do everything I could to help him attend, but it truly did boil down to financial aid. He never complained, and we waited so eagerly and patiently together for the day we received his package information.

I will never forget the day that we received his financial aid package. His acceptance was the first hurdle that we felt we were in control of. This was not - and his attendance and dream clung to this. Through financial aid assistance, our family contribution that first year for Niko to attend brought the cost to us from \$10,000 to \$660. I remember that day, that feeling and my emotion as I could finally tell my son that his dream had truly come true. He was going to attend The Maine School of Science and Mathematics. Niko has received financial aid every year that he has been there, with the awards being a little higher each year. I do not have adequate words to

fully express what the financial aid has meant to our family. Without it, he would not be where he is today.

The Maine School of Science and Mathematics has changed the course of my son's life. He has been challenged academically unlike any public school he has been to. Prior to his attendance at MSSM, Niko was often bored and disengaged in the classroom. Having a gifted son is the reason I went back later in life to become a teacher myself. Throughout his time at MSSM, he was able to pick challenging courses with professors that held doctorate degrees in their fields. The academic rigor has given Niko an opportunity to excel and be challenged, and has well prepared him for his college journey ahead. He has been able to play sports and is surrounded by a community of like-minded children, and people. This school is not just strong academically, although that cannot be understated. This is a school that genuinely and wholeheartedly cares about every student that attends, helping them to become the best version of themselves academically, socially, emotionally and physically.

As a mother of a student at this school, I have been continually impressed by every aspect of what makes this school so wonderful. This school focuses on building a small community that cares about each other, which is so critical as so many of these students are hundreds of miles away from their own families. I truly feel that my son is at a school surrounded by people that love and admire him as much as I do. My son has been able to shine, show who he truly is and continually be celebrated for it. This school does so much with so little - and ensures that each student that is a perfect fit for MSSM, is able to attend regardless of ability to pay.

As you can see, MSSM is a gift to the state of Maine and to each student that attends. LD787 proposes to increase the funding to MSSM by \$400,000 for general operations and \$250,000 for student financial aid. These are both critical increases to ensure that MSSM is able to continue helping students achieve their dreams, and continue to grow their community of learners while maintaining a strong school. The increase to their financial aid is so critical in these challenging financial times. There are many students, like Niko, who are unfortunately unable to attend without this. An increase in financial aid of \$250,000 a year means at minimum 20 more students per year can attend with nearly a free room and board, and when considering partial aid grants, it increases even more.

I ask that you please consider my son's journey and story when making the decision to pass these critical bills. MSSM is a gift to the students who attend, the families who support it and we are so lucky that Maine has this educational

opportunity. I ask that you please pass both of these bills, and any in the future that allow The Maine School of Science and Mathematics to continue to grow as a powerful educational institution. This is not just another high school, it is a true educational experience for gifted students. Niko's story is just one - and watching him graduate this May from this school will be a dream come true for both of us. Lastly, I would like to thank Sen. Nicole Grohoski of Hancock, and Sen. Sue Bernard of Aroostook respectfully for sponsoring this bill and seeing the true gift that this school is to the state of Maine.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Autumn Baldwin