



Good Afternoon Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is Megan Taft, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Rural Youth Institute. I am submitting testimony in strong support of LD 1389, An Act to Create the Building Opportunity through Out-of-School Time Program.

The Rural Youth Institute brings a depth of collective leadership experience in designing and implementing high-impact, evidence-based youth mentoring programs. Our work ensures that young people have access to a consistent network of support that carries them through pivotal years of growth and transition. When young people have stable, caring relationships throughout their formative years that enable access to valuable community assets and opportunity, they don't just imagine a better future—they build one.

Rural states like Maine – where 2 out of 3 schools and over half the student population are located in rural communities – face distinct obstacles to supporting young people on the pathway to thriving futures. Recent data demonstrates increased rates of poverty, social isolation and substance abuse for rural youth, further amplified by limited access to healthcare and mental health supports. Across Maine 70% of children have both parents working outside the home, with 83% of those children lacking access to out-of-school time programming. Investing in out-of-school time programming can offer a powerful antidote to many of these challenges.

When appropriately resourced, high impact youth development and out-of-school time programming can enrich a student's academic experience, create opportunities to build relationships with caring adult staff, and increase youth wellness and health outcomes. Through a longitudinal evaluation of our work at the Rural Youth Institute we have seen the impact of investing in youth programming. Students who engage in comprehensive long-term youth development programs demonstrate increased rates across key measures of resilience including, assertiveness, action orientation, reflection, empathy and optimism as well as increased academic performance.

Well-resourced, high-quality out-of-school time experiences can counteract the barriers of growing up in a rural community and ensure that every young person has the opportunity to dream big and build a life that feels both possible and fulfilling.

On behalf of the Rural Youth Institute, I thank you for your time and respectfully urge your support for LD 1389.

Megan Taft  
Rural Youth Institute  
Alna, Maine