



Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs.

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 1332, An Act to Establish the Community Schools Success Fund to Ensure the Implementation and Success of Community Schools Programs.

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.

Across the state we see the impact of rural challenges on youth aspirations and educational success. While small communities can have advantages, they can also be isolating – places where young people may find it challenging to earn a living or see a future for themselves. While Maine's high school graduation rate is high, educational attainment beyond high school falls well below the national average, holding many young people back – especially those from rural areas – and limiting their future opportunities for good paying jobs and fulfilling careers.

Data for youth in rural Maine paints a stark picture – elevated child poverty rates, the highest rates of child maltreatment in the nation (Kids Count data 2023), significantly low rates of youth reporting a sense of mattering in their communities (48%, 2021 MIYHS) and increased rates of mental health, with 48% of girls and 23% of boys reported feeling sad or hopeless, according to the Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey's 2021 report.

At the Rural Youth Institute, we refer to the strength of relationships between schools, families and community resources, as the three-legged stool of youth success. When one or more of these legs are weakened, the entire system becomes unstable. Too often, in rural communities, all three legs are strained.

Community Schools intentionally strengthen and connect each of the legs on the stool. Through highly localized efforts and strong partnerships, Community Schools prioritize

student and family engagement, while bridging the gaps between school and community resources to ensure access to enriched learning experiences for all youth.

Holistic approaches to youth development that consider 360 degrees of support for young people are at the heart of the Rural Youth Institute's mission and vision. This work is not about "fixing" young people; it is about investing in and creating environments where youth are surrounded by 360 degrees of support as they build meaningful, aspirational pathways to successful futures.

On behalf of the Rural Youth Institute, I thank you for your time and respectfully urge your support for LD 1332.

Megan Taft
Rural Youth Institute
Alna, Maine