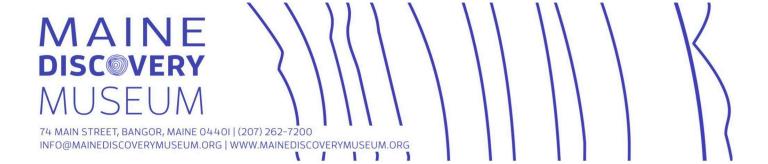


April 10, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee: My name is Kim Stewart, of Bangor, and I am testifying today in support of LD 281. I am here in two capacities: both as an employee of the Maine Discovery Museum and as a doctoral student at the University of Maine, studying how early science experiences serve as pathways to higher education.

I want to share a story with you today that I think illustrates the importance of informal STEM education programs like the Maine Science Festival, Maine Invention Convention, and our Science Around ME outreach. As part of the MSF we host a field trip day for middle school students every year where we bring 350 7th and 8th graders from across the state together for a day of hands-on activities and workshops where they have opportunities to interact with professionals and researchers from across the spectrum of STEM fields. They have opportunities to experience everything from augmented reality, to coding robots, to wound care, to the intersection of science and art, to bridge building; we've got it all. We want them to see that while science can be wearing a white coat in a lab, it can also be so many other things! We want them to see that all sorts of people can be scientists. Our presenters represent folks from a variety of cultures, ethnicities, genders, age ranges, levels of expertise, and other backgrounds. In 2022, one of the hands-on activities included a large poster where students could write answers to questions, creating a real-time word cloud. One question asked who is your favorite scientist? Among answers such as Bill Nye and Neil deGrasse Tyson, and a few presenters they met that day, was also the answer "future me." That is the power of informal STEM



education - making connections between students and the real-world STEM opportunities we have right here in Maine.

At the Maine Science Festival, in the Maine Invention Convention, and through our statewide outreach programs students are exposed to opportunities they don't experience in a formal classroom setting and they can be inspired to see themselves as scientists.

So, why is state funding for these programs so crucial? According to the Maine DECD's ten-year economic development strategy, we need to grow our workforce by at least 75,000 people by the year 2029 and one of the strategies for doing so is by growing our local talent. The Maine Discovery Museum helps achieve that goal. With state funding, which LD 281 would provide, MDM would be able to make an even larger impact on STEM education in Maine and would provide important work to strengthen the pipeline to higher education and workforce for Maine students. Across the US, museums like MDM receive 20-24% of their annual budget from government support. MDM, however, currently relies solely on grants, fundraising, and admissions, without any government support. Given the changing economic landscape in Maine and the goals of the economic development strategy, I encourage you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 281. Show Maine students that we are invested in their futures and help prepare them for the growing career opportunities they will have when they enter the workforce.

Thank you very much for your time and your consideration,

Kim Stewart

kstewart@mainediscoverymuseum.org