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ATTN: LD 1543 “An Act to Establish the Green Schools Network”

Dear Chairman Rafferty & Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

As an educator in Maine, I strongly support the passage of the LD 1543 “An Act to Establish the Green Schools Network.” At a time when Maine schools are being asked to support the serious needs of their students and families with ever fewer resources, this legislation presents an opportunity to enable school districts to put important sustainability practices in place.

Teachers and students in my district are currently asking for many of the things this legislation would enable: improving systems to increase recycling efforts, incorporating school gardens into school curriculum and practice, and being able to meaningfully facilitate student leadership on these efforts. While administrators are supportive of these efforts, in the midst of budget cuts and dwindling resources for maintenance and facilities budgets, we have not been able to put all of these pieces into practice. I am excited about the prospect of this legislation to help us make these ideas a reality through financial support and networking resources.

During my time as a middle school science teacher at Lakes Region School District in Naples, Maine, I saw how impactful actionable student leadership on sustainability topics can be. My colleagues and I designed an interdisciplinary “Resource Use and Waste” unit where students selected a topic related to water, waste, energy, or food at our middle school. These projects involved data collection (the analysis of which was supported in the math classroom) and students proposed a change or a solution to improve the sustainability of this topic at our school. This place-based learning experience felt authentic to students and I was impressed with their sense of ownership of these projects as well as their enthusiasm for their work. Students created presentations (which were supported in the English Language Arts classroom) which were on display during a very well attended community night: family members and other folks from the community came out to see these projects and celebrate students’ work.

This Resource Use and Waste unit came to fruition through a year of valuable professional support from the Maine Math and Science Alliance: teams of educators with student representatives from around the state designed their own units to address issues of concern at their own schools while creating authentic opportunities for their students to explore STEM learning (Science Technology Engineering and Math). This legislation has the potential to make this kind of student and teacher leadership opportunity more accessible to schools around the state, while linking it to curriculum standards and to community organizations. The opt-in nature of this proposed project would provide

this opportunity to schools who were ready for it and would not require “yet another thing” to schools who are not there yet. The network approach that is being proposed is one that I have found to be very successful - linking students and staff around the state to support each other with initiatives like this and to help propel ideas forward can be very helpful as it can feel isolating to take on big projects like this without a supportive network.

I feel lucky to work in the Oxford Hills School District, which has become a leader for prioritizing outdoor and experiential learning. Through strong community support paired with intentional use of COVID Relief Funding, each of our elementary schools has an outdoor classroom, a school garden, and a nature trail. Our district has an Outdoor Learning Coach to support the integration of these learning spaces and has an off-campus experiential learning center at Roberts Farm Preserve, where I teach outdoor STEM lessons aligned with the elementary curriculum students receive back at school. We have seen so many benefits from the investments into these kinds of learning experiences, from increased student engagement to reduction in negative behaviors and distractions. Students tell us they learn better in these hands-on environments, they can see connections that support their understanding of concepts and that it feels less stressful than traditional education.

As we continue to grow our programming and strengthen our systems to support this kind of meaningful learning, the staff and students in our district would benefit from networking with other schools undertaking similar initiatives as well as funding to help realize our goals, especially in light of tight budgets.

I urge you to support this critical investment in Maine’s schools for the students in those schools. Thank you for your time and consideration of this bill.

Sincerely,

Sarah Kearsley

Experiential STEM Teacher at Roberts Farm

Oxford Hills School District