

Greetings Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Jaye Rich (she/her). I serve on the Auburn School Committee, I'm treasurer of the Maine Education Association, and I teach multilingual learners at McMahon Elementary in Lewiston. I'm here today to express strong support for LD 1219.

As an educator, I'm deeply concerned about the teacher shortage we're facing. Fewer students are entering teacher prep programs, and many who want to pursue teaching simply can't afford the cost of college. A bachelor's degree is required to teach, and ongoing professional learning is essential, but Maine's continued disinvestment in higher education makes that harder every year.

At the same time, students in our university system are taking on crushing debt. Some graduate with over \$100,000 in loans, while others skip meals or basic necessities just to stay enrolled. At UMaine Orono, students have created a food pantry to help their peers survive. That's inspiring—but also heartbreaking. No student should have to choose between tuition and food.

Meanwhile, wages for university staff have declined over the past several years—7% for UMPSA, 6% for AFUM, and 4% for ACSUM—and now some employees are turning to public assistance just to get by. On top of that, the University of Maine System has \$1.6 billion in deferred maintenance. This is unsustainable.

The Governor proposed a modest 4% increase in funding, which wasn't included in the current budget. Freezing funding yet again will only deepen the crisis. If we don't invest now, we'll pay later—in workforce gaps, lost economic opportunity, and increased reliance on public support.

Public higher education in Maine should be affordable, accessible, and strong. For our students, for our educators, and for the future of our state, I urge you to support LD 1219.

Thank you.