

Testimony in Support of LD 1624, An Act to Fund Summer School and Credit Recovery Programs through the Department of Education

Good morning, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Boni Kabongo, and I serve as the Academic Program Director at Tree Street Youth Center in Lewiston. Today, however, I speak to you not in an official capacity, but as a proud Mainer and resident of Scarborough who has spent over a decade working in education and youth development. Through my work with schools and organizations such as Waynflete School, Lewiston High School, the Boys & Girls Club, Seeds of Peace in Otisfield, and Tree Street Youth Center. I've witnessed firsthand a simple, unchanging truth, that when we invest in students year-round, they thrive. When we don't, they fall behind and some never catch up.

I first discussed the issues that would become this bill while working with Representative Warren on legislation regarding summer food programs. As those conversations around insufficient funding for my students in their summer schooling led to this bill, I've learned the ways in which, time and time again, our state has failed to establish sustainable, long-term funding for summer school and credit recovery programs. Instead, we've relied on temporary patches, pilot programs, short-term grants, and most critically in this case, one-time federal COVID relief dollars that have now run out. And they do so as districts face multiple additional burdens, of inflation, cost of living, and political uncertainties in setting their budgets. As a result, districts across Maine are being forced to cut programs that have made all the difference for students trying to stay on track to graduate and walk into their future with their peers.

In my work, I've supported students who face unimaginable circumstances like grieving the loss of a parent or sibling, adjusting to homelessness, or living in homes where abuse, substance use or mental illness dominate. I've worked with kids caring for younger siblings, waking up early to babysit before trying to make it to school themselves. Others walk into classrooms carrying the weight of relentless bullying or mental health struggles. And yet, they show up. Every day. Hoping that someone, somewhere, still believes in them. We can't simply wish them the best. We have to see them, fight for them, and put funding where it will make a real difference.

For many students, summer school isn't just about catching up on credits. It's a lifeline. In the midst of hardship, it can be the first glimpse of a future that feels possible. This year alone, I've worked with students who were counting on summer school as their chance to turn things around- only to find out it wasn't available or they couldn't access it. The impact of that loss is immeasurable.

If we don't pass this bill and fund it, we're not simply losing a few months of instruction. We're jeopardizing the futures of countless young people, especially those who are already slipping through the cracks. The reality is clear: without summer programming, many students will not graduate. Not because they can't but because we failed to show up when it mattered most.

Every time we take resources away, we don't just shrink a budget, we shrink their trust. Not in some distant "system," but in us. The politicians, decision-makers, teachers, and mentors who promised to be there. We teach them that support is conditional. That when things get tough, their resources are the first to be sacrificed.

That is a lesson no young person should ever have to learn.

This isn't just about funding. It's about who we are. I am asking you to be the kind of adults who step up when our kids need us most. Maine's future depends on its youth. And our youth depend on us.

Investing in summer school is one small but powerful way to say we see you, we believe in you, and we're here for you not just during the school year, but whenever you need us.

We cannot continue to wait for someone else to protect the future of Maine's youth. That responsibility rests with us right here, with you right now. Our state needs these young people in our schools, in our workforce, and in our communities. Supporting this bill sends a clear message and that is that their future matters. And by extension, you're saying that the future of our state does too.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to Maine's future. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.