



Testimony in Opposition to LD 1579:
“An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda”

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and the distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Harris Van Pate, and I serve as policy analyst for Maine Policy Institute. Maine Policy is a free-market think tank, a nonpartisan, non-profit organization that advocates for individual liberty and economic freedom in Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to LD 1579, "An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda."

LD 1579 represents a concerning erosion of local control and democratic participation in education governance. By eliminating the requirement for voters to validate school budgets at the ballot box, this bill strips Maine citizens of one of their most direct means of overseeing and influencing how their hard-earned tax dollars are spent on public education.

In 2007, Maine moved toward requiring budget validation referenda as a critical mechanism to ensure transparency, accountability, and public trust in school district spending.^{1 2} These referenda empower citizens to have a say in one of the most significant expenditures in their municipal budgets. Under the current system, taxpayers have the opportunity to approve or reject school budgets through an open and democratic process. LD 1579 would remove this critical check.

Proponents argue that referenda are costly or redundant. But the modest costs associated with conducting a vote are far outweighed by the benefits of fostering civic engagement and maintaining the legitimacy of local governance. Participation in school budget votes educates the public, holds school boards accountable, and ensures that budgets are responsive to the community's will.

Removing the referendum requirement would further centralize decision-making in unelected or less directly accountable administrative bodies, creating distance between taxpayers and those who allocate public funds. It would increase the potential for unchecked spending, as history shows that without voter oversight, public budgets tend to grow at unsustainable rates, burdening property taxpayers, especially in rural and aging communities.

Across Maine, local governance is a tradition built on community participation. Whether at a town meeting or a school budget referendum, Mainers have long cherished their right to make decisions about the future of their towns and their children's education.

¹ <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/20-a/title20-Asec1486.html>

² <https://mainepolicy.org/the-school-budget-validation-process-empowering-voters-achieving-savings/>



LD 1579 would undercut this tradition, placing too much faith in top-down administrative structures and too little in the citizens themselves.

Finally, it is worth noting that other states look to Maine's model of direct citizen validation of school budgets as a way to ensure fiscal responsibility and community trust. Weakening this model would move Maine in the wrong direction — away from accountability, transparency, and democracy.

For these reasons, Maine Policy Institute strongly urges this committee to vote "Ought Not to Pass" on LD 1579. Let us continue to uphold the proud tradition of citizen-driven government in Maine, not dismantle it. Thank you for your time and consideration.