

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO

L.D. 1579

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AN ACT TO ABOLISH SCHOOL BUDGET REFERENDA

April 30, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Steven Bailey, the Executive Director of the Maine School Boards Association, testifying on behalf of the MSBA legislative committee in opposition to L.D. 1579, An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda.

Our association understands the bill sponsor's concerns about the lack of voter turnout for school budget and general feelings that local officials should be trusted to decide on school budgets. However, we believe that current state statute already allows for flexibility in the budget validation process, and L.D. 1579 would remove an important part of the local democratic process, eroding trust and connection between schools and communities.

The budget referendum process for regional school units is governed by M.R.S.A 20-A Section 1486. Along with requirements to hold a school budget vote every year, the law states that every three years, voters will also vote on whether they "wish to continue the process for another 3 years. A vote to continue retains the process for 3 additional years. A vote to discontinue the process ends its use beginning with the following budget year and prohibits its reconsideration for at least 3 years."

This provision allows for important local control over the referendum process. If a district doesn't want to keep using the referendum process, residents can vote to abolish it. In fact, many districts have taken that step and no longer require a community-wide referendum. L.D. 1579 would remove that local control. If residents of a town or district continue to say that they would like to maintain the referendum process, why would we want to take it away? We believe this should remain a local decision.

We also believe the removal of a referendum would be even more undemocratic than the current system. If L.D. 1579 were to pass, the final aspect of the budget process in many communities would be the school budget meeting, which is far less attended than a district-wide referendum. Attending this meeting requires a substantial time commitment, filtering out who can even attend. Such a small fraction of people should not have final decision-making power over a budget that will affect hundreds of students and thousands of taxpayers.

In addition, the current budget development process allows for checks and balances. Residents can vote down a budget if they think it is too large – and they can vote it down if they feel the school board has cut the budget too much. This allows for an additional level of oversight, ensuring a satisfactory budget number is eventually reached.

We acknowledge that budget referenda do not have optimal turnout and voter participation. But the solution should be searching for new ways to energize local civic engagement and interest in government – not stripping away an important part of the budget development process. Given these concerns, and the options already available at the local level to end budget referenda, we urge you to reject L.D. 1579.