



Maine School Superintendents Association



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF

L.D. 1579

OFFICERS—2024-25

AN ACT TO ABOLISH SCHOOL BUDGET REFERENDA

April 30, 2025

PRESIDENT
MARIA LIBBY
MSAD 28/FIVE TOWN CSD
CAMDEN, 04843

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Eileen King, the Executive Director of the Maine School Superintendents Association, testifying on behalf of the MSSA legislative committee in support of L.D. 1579, An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda.

PRESIDENT-ELECT
DR. ANDREW DOLLOFF
YARMOUTH SCHOOL DEPARTMENT
YARMOUTH, 04096

Under Title 20-A, §1486, the approval of a regional school unit's annual budget involves a two-step process. However, it is important to note that months of work take place prior to getting to the Regional School Budget meeting.

VICE PRESIDENT
RHONDA SPERREY
RSU 64/MSAD 64
CORINTH, 04427

1. **Regional School Unit Budget Meeting:** The school board presents the proposed budget to the public, allowing for discussion and potential amendments. This meeting is open to all community members and serves as a forum for transparency and engagement.

SECRETARY/TREASURER
BENJAMIN SIROIS
VALLEY UNIFIED REGIONAL
SERVICE CENTER
FORT KENT, 04743

2. **Budget Validation Referendum:** Following the budget meeting, a referendum is held to allow voters to approve or reject the total budget adopted at the meeting. The vote at the referendum is for the purpose of approving or rejecting the total regional school unit budget approved at the budget meeting.

PAST PRESIDENT
PATRICIA HOPKINS
MSAD 11
GARDINER, 04345

MSSA believes that the current two-step process – first a vote at the budget meeting, then a town vote at the referendum – is unnecessarily duplicative and inefficient. The school budget process should be an informed, transparent, and streamlined procedure. The budget meeting already provides an opportunity for members of the community to engage, ask questions, and gain understanding about the budget. The referendum that follows serves only as a redundant layer of bureaucracy that often lacks the same level of community engagement, transparency or informed decision-making.

EILEEN E. KING
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The public has numerous opportunities to engage in the school budget process. All budget meetings held at the Board level are open to the public, and community members are encouraged to attend, learn about the budget, and participate in discussions. Additionally, town finance meetings offer further opportunities for engagement, allowing citizens to discuss the budget and provide their input. These meetings are also frequently televised, giving the public flexibility to view them at their convenience.

49 COMMUNITY DRIVE
AUGUSTA ME 04330
(207) 622-3473
(800) 660-8484

The development of school budgets begins as early as November at the district level, with detailed presentations at the school board usually starting in January. This extended timeline ensures ample opportunity for public participation. In fact, most school budgets are not finalized until June, providing a thorough and transparent process with ample time for community input and feedback.

Leading for equity, excellence and opportunity for all Maine Students

The current referendum requirement, meanwhile, allows for an arbitrary decision by community members who may not have the full context of the budget, potentially leading to an outcome driven by misinformation or a lack of understanding of the school's needs. These referendum votes also rarely demonstrate the true voice of a community, as participation is routinely very low – often just a small fraction of participation in a gubernatorial election. Our hope would be that eliminating the budget validation referendum would encourage more participation at the school budget meeting, with more meaningful discussion and information on each individual aspect of the budget and how it was developed.

This system undermines the careful planning and oversight that school boards and finance committees undertake to craft thoughtful and necessary budgets. The additional referendum stage can allow for the rejection of budgets based on misinformation or a lack of understanding of the school's needs, further complicating the funding process.

For these reasons, MSSA strongly supports L.D. 1579. Abolishing the school budget referendum requirement will lead to more efficient and effective budget approval, ensuring that our schools can continue to operate with the financial stability they need to serve Maine's students.