

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO

L.D. 1586

AN ACT TO AMEND THE REGIONAL SCHOOL UNIT BUDGET VALIDATION REFERENDUM LAW

April 30, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Robbie Feinberg, the Director of Communications and Government Relations of the Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and the Maine School Superintendents Association in opposition to L.D. 1586.

This bill requests to place the total amount of the budget on the Budget Validation Referendum question that provides the vote to approve or disapprove of a school administrative unit's budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Both associations see multiple problems with this practice.

First of all, there are logistic and practical issues with this request. The timing of the creation of the ballots (including absentee ballots) is such that it could be problematic to get the budget total onto the ballot in a timely manner. Town clerks are statutorily required to receive ballots early – absentee ballots must be provided the day after a budget meeting.

Currently, these ballots can be created easily, in advance, at any time, where they now only request a Yes or No vote. L.D. 1586 would require these ballots to be updated with the latest budget numbers and printed within just a few hours, placing a larger administrative burden on both school officials and town clerks. We do not want to see clerks, those responsible for preparing these votes, to be challenged in getting voting materials ready for each budget vote, especially when this is a very busy time, often with other local, state, and national election ballots need to be prepared at the same time.

Moreover, we feel this is unnecessary when Maine law already requires the posting of the school budget within each polling location – not only the total budget amount, but also the amounts requested for each Cost Center subtotal. The amount required for the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) portion of the budget is posted, as is the amount above the EPS amount that the school board is requesting to service the programmatic and facility needs of the school district. Many schools even go beyond and provide last year's budget information to allow residents to compare. This budget information is made available to residents of the school community multiple times, through multiple means, so that residents going to the polls to vote on the school district budget should be well-informed as to the total cost of the school budget for the ensuing fiscal year.

With only a single number on the Budget Validation Referendum ballot, without the full budget picture of requests provided on the ballot, residents could be voting on a budget number blind, without any knowledge or supporting information on which to judge their voting decision. Considering the ample information and context that school districts are already required to provide – and the potential administrative challenges this bill presents, our organizations do not think this is a positive change and urge the Committee to vote Ought Not to Pass on L.D. 1586.