

James Lockman
Gorham, FIRST Robotics Team 172
LD 1740

My three children have participated in FIRST Robotics as part of FIRST Team 172 Northern Force. As a parent and team mentor for the last 16 years, I have been involved in fundraising for the team and volunteering at the league level in Maine, New England and at the World Championships. I have seen tens of thousands of students and their families benefit from this and similar competitive Robotics programs. Operating the team is comparable to operating a football or hockey team: league entry fees alone cost over \$6,000 and another \$6,000 if you advance to the District Championship and another \$6,000 to attend the World Championship. This does not include the cost of the robot itself, its maintenance and upkeep, travel to and from the event, and the facilities cost at the Maine Mall where we build, collaborate and practice with other teams. When you factor it all in, we spend over \$30,000 per year to ensure that our kids have no barrier to entry, that every kid has a meaningful and exciting experience, and that every kid comes out of the program having accomplished personal and team goals.

We also teach practical skills such as machine tool operation, electronics and wiring, CAD, additive manufacturing, coding, game strategy and execution, negotiation, public speaking, business management, marketing, and more. These skilled students can go into the workforce immediately or can go on to technical or 4-year schools. Our students take all three of these pathways once they graduate from Gorham or Falmouth, enriching the workforce and ensuring our high-tech companies have the skilled workers and engineers they need for sustainable growth here in Maine.

This program, which includes students from Gorham and Falmouth, receives relatively little support from either school, unlike sports programs that at least have foundational budgets. A matching grant program would allow us to expand the number of students we can impact by growing the number of teams in our STEM Coliseum. For all schools and community programs, matching grants would make competition in this league more achievable or perhaps even possible. Please make this bill into law so that we can strengthen the pipeline for skilled STEM workers in Maine.