



Statement for the EDU Committee

In support of LD 823 Testimony

“An Act To Establish a Grant Program to Provide for Statewide and Equitable Access to Experiential STEM Education”

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Dear Chairs Rafferty and Murphy and Honorable Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Dr. Ruth Kermish-Allen and I serve as the Executive Director of the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance (MMSA), a non-profit committed to advancing equitable access to STEM education for all PreK-12 students. We accomplish this vision by providing research-based professional learning strategies for educators. I also have served as a Commissioner on the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, and I live in Appleton with my two teenage daughters. I have also served on the Governor’s AI Taskforce as well as the Governor’s taskforce on offshore wind energy. I am here today to stand in strong support of LD823, which if enacted, will show our great state’s commitment to Maine’s educators and students and the STEM research projects they are passionate about.

MMSA stepped up to the plate to join the Jackson Labs in 2014 to take on the Maine State Science Fair after the Maine Principal’s Association decided to no longer facilitate the competition. Our expertise in reaching educators and rural schools enabled our partnership to truly begin making strides to increase equitable access to research opportunities through the MSSF. To make this happen, we utilized a 10-year private grant restricted to out-of-school STEM learning opportunities for Maine’s students. We believed then, and still do today, that Maine’s students should have the opportunity to compete with our nation’s best and brightest young researchers. These hands-on, student-driven learning experiences are instrumental in

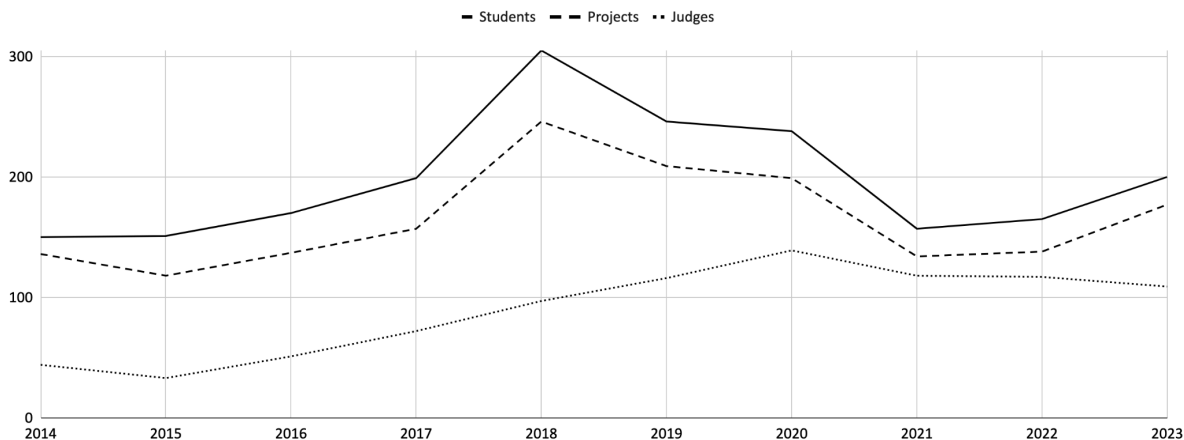
developing the confidence, skills, and creative spark that will stick with that student for many years to come.

The STEM competition we are discussing here today is not the “science fair” we grew up with - filled with volcanoes and moldy bread; these students are diving deep into the wicked problems our society faces - societal challenges today’s youth want to DO something about, issues they want to design solutions for - designing more cost effective medical devices, addressing the problems emerging due to microplastics, growing food to feed a growing population - and that is just a sampling of a few of the projects we had the honor of seeing at the MSSF last weekend.

Given MMSA’s expertise in professional development with educators, we decided to take on the challenge of making the MSSF a more equitable and inclusive STEM learning opportunity for Maine’s youth. We designed a teacher fellows program that has supported over 40 teachers as they integrated experiential STEM into their classes - resulting in over 700 student participants to date. In the past, only a handful of schools consistently participated in the MSSF - today we have not only a broader representation of schools from small high schools to some of the largest, we also now include multiple career and technical centers. These students ranging from Bethel to Machias get to connect with peers they otherwise would never have the opportunity to connect with.

Thanks to our partnerships with Maine colleges and universities, over 200 students have been awarded over \$6 Million over the last seven years. Many of these students have received full-tuition scholarships, renewable for all four years of college. We know personally many students for whom this was a game-changer: some who were working to support their family and then got a full-tuition scholarship; some who did not know what they were going to do for college until they got a scholarship; some who are now working in the labs of the very judges who interviewed them for those scholarships. The opportunity you are discussing supporting today changes lives dramatically for Maine’s students. In just the past five years over 1,200 students have competed in the MSSF and we want to see that number grow.

MSSF Growth, 2014-2023



We all know the workforce recruitment and retention challenges our state faces. The bill in front of you builds on the strategies outlined in *Maine's Economic Development Strategy* plan to enable us to meet the economic development and workforce goals that are critical to our state's success. We need to build more opportunities for our youth to find success in STEM here at home and this bill will ensure that it supports and provides the only opportunity our youth have to compete in STEM research at a national level. We want to make sure that Maine's youth always have access to learning experiences like this no matter where they live, no matter who is coordinating the MSSF. Maine's youth almost lost access to this experience 10 years ago - this bill will ensure that we never risk that loss again. Supporting this bill will give a vote of confidence and support to Maine's next generation of inventors, researchers, and entrepreneurs.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill supporting Maine's future STEM workforce, innovators, and problem solvers. I urge you to please vote yes on this bill. It is a minimal investment with the potential for exponentially greater outcomes for our young people, our STEM workforce, and our ability to recruit and retain the talent we need to meet our goals as a state.

- **Ruth Kermish-Allen, PhD.**