

LD972 An Act to Change the Entity Responsible for Operating the Career and Technical Education Center in Machias to Regional School Unit 37

My name is Lucille Willey. I am the Director of the Coastal Washington County Tech Center in Western Washington County. This bill proposes a vital administrative change that would significantly improve operations for our school.

Background and Current Situation

Prior to the fall of 2022, students from Washington Academy, Jonesport-Beals, Machias, and Narraguagus had very limited access to any type of career and technical education. Despite the fact that Machias was technically approved as a center, there was minimal movement between schools for the 4 available programs, with many students unable to participate at all.

In 2018, RSU 37 identified an opportunity through the Fund for Efficient Delivery of Educational Services (FEDES) to seek funding for creating more CTE options to students within the Western Washington County area. The SAD 37 superintendent invited all superintendents and board chairs to a meeting to discuss the FEDES grant opportunities. From that initial meeting, this group, along with other administrators, school board members, and citizens from the communities formed a group and met regularly for the purpose of planning a Down East Maine CTE Collaborative. In December of 2018, the group was notified that RSU 37 as the fiscal agent would be awarded \$2,062,667 to meet the following goals:

1. To increase CTE programming options for students in CWCIT catchment area.
2. To provide new CTE programs at a location and time that would encourage students to enroll in programs of interest.
3. To ensure the sustainability of the 2019-20 four new programs at a satellite site.
4. To work toward implementation of the new CTE statutes that went into law with the passage of LD1843 for Title 20-A MRSA.
5. To offer programs that will prepare students for employment in current or emerging occupations.
6. To expand CTE to middle schools and students enrolled in alternative education.

The intent of this project was to have a site within RSU 37 to operate the four new programs. Once the group was told that the grant was approved, Machias School Department was unwilling to accept that the project would be housed in RSU 37 and then the State would not release the money until the location issue was resolved. The group agreed to hire Lyndon Kech from PDT architects to do a study of available buildings and locations within our catchment area. They narrowed the choices to 2. One was in Machias and the other in RSU 37. The one in RSU 37 was ranked number one, in part due to the fact that it would allow for additional programs over time. The one in Machias would not. Additionally the building in Machias was for sale for \$750,000 and the one in RSU 37 was available at a much reduced rate (\$150,000) because the owners were excited about it becoming a site for CTE. Machias disagreed with a decision to go

with the RSU site, and the project was at a standstill. An independent facilitator, Fern Desjardins, State School Board member, was hired as a facilitator. There were several public meetings and it was very clear that Machias was willing to lose the opportunity for all students if it was not going to be in Machias. After many heated discussions, many of the Machias residents and Board members started to speak up and the Machias school board then voted to allow the project to be in RSU 37.

In the years before 2018, that State had issued extra vocational subsidy for at least two years in a row. This was an initiative to put more emphasis on CTE. Early on in the planning process of the FEDES grant, the Machias superintendent mentioned they could hold the money so it could be used to help this project, but that never happened.

In the fall of 2020, the doors opened to the facility at 11 Addison Road, in Columbia, Maine with four programs. Jonesport-Beals had been working with CWCIT to start an Aquaculture program as a satellite at their school. That program also started in the fall of 2020.

This created a unique situation where the majority of the programs were now located in RSU 37, but the center was Machias, where only 2 programs were located within their high school. It was hard to know at that time how complicated that setup would be for operations. The center in other schools is located where the majority of programs, students, and staff are located, and programs in other areas are satellites of that Center. Over the period of the last 5 years, I have had the opportunity to see why that is the best scenario.

Remarkable Growth and Current Structure

In five years, CWCIT has expanded from 4 to 11 programs, with the majority housed in the RSU facility. This center, located in RSU 37, has actually become the operational hub for CTE in Western Washington County.

- It is the building where most students attend.
- The whole CWCIT follows the RSU 37 calendar and storm delays
- 10 of the 14 total staff members work at the RSU facility
- Students from all four sending schools attend daily

Administrative Challenges Under Current Structure

Despite the operational reality that RSU 37 serves as the center's main hub, Machias remains the designated fiscal agent, creating numerous challenges:

1. Logical Disconnect: First of all, it makes little sense for the Machias School Dept. and Town Council to hold operational controls over a CTE school that has most of its programs in another school district.

2. **Grant Application Issues:** A \$480,000 infrastructure grant application was automatically disqualified because it was signed by the RSU superintendent, despite RSU 37 being the district undertaking the renovation program. This was in no way due to Machias being unwilling to sign the application, it was simply a mistake on the part of both entities which could have been avoided if there was one fiscal agency to deal with.
3. **Equipment Procurement Barriers:** A planned purchase of a 9-passenger van for student transport to clinical sites was delayed due to different operating procedures between the two entities, Machias and RSU, and by the time we were able to complete the purchase, which had been approved by Perkins, the Machias finance officer emailed the new Perkins director and was told that the preference now had become not to use Perkins funding for vans which would hold 10 passengers, but for activity vans which would hold 15 and was about twice as much money. So the recommendation from both superintendents was not to use the money to buy the van. This was May and the funds had to be reallocated spent within about a month.
4. **Staff Management Complications:** Staff working at the RSU 37 building (10 of the 14 total) are considered Machias employees, even though they are hired and paid through RSU 37. This creates certification tracking issues, and other reporting issues by having
5. **Financial Strain:** RSU 37 fronts significant amounts of money for salaries, benefits, building costs, equipment maintenance, and so on before receiving the first quarterly subsidy payment from Machias which comes to them in November. RSU 37 also has about \$1.5 million of its own funds invested in the building plus a \$600,000 bond.
6. **Purchases are complicated.** We go through Machias for Perkins and through RSU 37 for all other items. This has caused delivery issues, since everything through Perkins has a Machias address, and everything through RSU 37 has our address. Also every vendor we purchase from, regardless of the funding we use, has to be listed as a vendor. Some are vendors of both entities, some are not, so that creates a timing issue while companies are being set up as vendors.

To be clear, both entities have tried to make this work for the past 5 years and neither entity has tried to do anything to make operations more difficult. But the more hands things have to go through, the more chance for error and the more chance that in the end, too much time has gone by to make opportunities happen, like the purchase of the van. Having one entity to work through would make everything smoother and more efficient.

And so, to summarize: Benefits and Fiscal Impact of Proposed Changes

1. **Zero Cost to Taxpayers:** Once again, there is no fiscal change to either entity. This change will not increase state spending, or require any additional resources.
2. **Reduces Red Tape:** By eliminating a duplication of efforts in administrative processes, we are putting more resources toward education rather than administration.

3. Supports Rural Communities: This CTE center is vital to Western Washington County's future, providing skills training that helps keep young people in our rural communities.
4. Promotes Accountability: Placing administrative responsibility with the district that houses the majority of the programs and creates very clear lines of accountability for program success.

The Career and Technical School established five years ago has made a tremendous difference for students throughout Western Washington County, offering pathways to high-wage careers without requiring a four-year degree. There is still room for expansion in the building in RSU 37 and there are plans in place to add Cosmetology, Plumbing, and Heating. By aligning administrative responsibility with operational reality, LD972 would ensure this valuable educational resource can continue to grow and serve students efficiently.

I urge the committee to vote to pass this bill. This legislative action represents a common-sense solution that aligns administrative responsibility with operational reality, creating efficiencies that will benefit students, working families, and taxpayers throughout all of Western Washington County.