

State of Maine
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Fern Desjardins, Chair of the Maine State Board of Education

Neither For Nor Against L.D. 1892: An Act to Establish Procedures for School Construction Projects.

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Representative Brennan

Date: May 9, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Fern Desjardins, and I serve as Chair of the Maine State Board of Education. I am joining you virtually to submit testimony on behalf of the State Board neither for nor against L.D. 1892: An Act to Establish Procedures for School Construction Projects.

The need for school construction and renovations in Maine has been well documented in a number of testimonies submitted to the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee and the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee on bills related to the topic in the last few legislative sessions. It's also been documented in reports by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute and the Department of Education.

Ideas provided for approving more schools for construction by raising the debt ceiling or considering alternative sources of funding have often surfaced. The significant increase in construction cost per square foot has impacted the number of Major Capital School Construction Program projects approved in recent rating cycles, as evidenced in the numbers below:

1999-2000 Rating Cycle	24 projects approved; 70 applications received
2001-2002 Rating Cycle	11 projects approved; 92 applications
2004-2005 Rating Cycle	20 projects approved; 66 applications
2010-2011 Rating Cycle	16 projects approved; 71 applications
2017-2018 Rating Cycle	9 projects approved; 74 applications
2024-2025 Rating Cycle	96 applications received; site visits in progress

Providing incentives for school consolidation and including an equity component in appropriating funding have also been suggested as ways to increase the number of projects approved for school construction. The sponsors and cosponsors of L.D. 1892 are to be commended for their varied ways of funding a School Construction Debt Service Fund and for requiring projects that are cost-effective, energy efficient, and meeting low-emission standards. Requiring districts to pay a percentage of their construction projects, as opposed to the current all-or-nothing funding model, would increase the capacity for more projects to be approved and perhaps enhance overall equity in school construction.

There are a number of very good ideas in L.D. 1892 for increasing the amount of money available to fund school construction. The main concern of the State Board is the timing of this bill. Changes to Title 20-A should be deferred until the report from the Governor's Commission on School Construction becomes available. Their recommendations should be discussed and considered prior to amending the current law; otherwise, Commission members will have wasted their time and efforts in identifying potential changes to current state law, rules, and policies controlling school construction.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment, and I would be happy to answer questions the committee may have.