

Hearing on: LD2008
Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Testimony: Heather Merriman, Harpswell

January 29, 2026

Honorable Members of the Committee,

Thank you for hearing the important **merits of LD2008** before your committee today. I write to you as a **grateful graduate** of the MSSM and the MSSM Foundation board president.

MSSM is established by, and operates in support of, the **Maine Legislature's responsibility** to educate our future generation of leaders by providing access to a generative, forward-looking curriculum that is at the forefront of STEM education in the State of Maine. The **MSSM Foundation**, established even before MSSM opened its doors to the first class of students—has been working tirelessly to **raise funds to enhance the education excellence** this public program is designed to provide to students experiencing what the **Department of Education promises to the children of Maine, a path to “reach their greatest level of achievement.”**

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the first graduating class, our alumni are now stepping forward. **Graduates** from our pioneer classes have reached a pivotal moment: after investing years in their own education and careers, they are **positioned to give back** to the institution that transformed their lives. They are demonstrating their **gratitude with financial contributions as well as sharing their expertise**, actions that show up in a multitude of ways such as returning to teach at MSSM, supporting the school's specialized programming with their professional experience, or in my case, by volunteering on the Foundation Board, where alumni hold the majority of leadership positions in support of MSSM.

The results speak for themselves. Under this current leadership, the Foundation has achieved remarkable growth. Our program expenditures have increased fivefold—from a three-year average of \$33,000 to \$190,000 annually. The centerpiece of this growth is **the Penguin Fund**, an annual giving program that now provides **2% of the school's operating budget**.

This is just the beginning; like an exponential curve, the growth in the early evolution of an organization is small. Gratitude for our state's residential magnet school experience is gaining steam. Did you make a gift in support of your public high school last year? I did, and so did my parents. Over **10% of our alumni and their families contributed to the Foundation's fundraising efforts last year**—an extraordinary participation rate that reflects the profound impact MSSM has had on their lives. As I settle into my fifth decade of life, I have established my home, family, and career (in environmental engineering) here in my home state. I am grateful that all of the advanced educational opportunities I experienced at the high school and college level were provided at Maine's public institutions.

The Foundation's great strides support only **one leg of the stool** and without growing **support from the legislature, the essential component of the school's funding model** (remember this is a school with no municipal tax base contribution, or other mechanism to increase public funds), this school cannot stand. Without state investment, many of our most promising young minds will not receive the special education support they deserve as part of the State's charge to support the full spectrum of learning needs our children represent.

However, private philanthropy cannot do this alone. While **the Foundation is confident in our ability to continue growing private support, we cannot replace state investment**. The margin of excellence that makes MSSM a *nationally recognized institution* depends on adequate state funding.

I respectfully urge this Committee to increase state funding for MSSM so that together—through the partnership of public investment and private philanthropy—we can ensure this vital educational resource continues to serve Maine's students and prepare them to contribute to our state's future.

Thank you for your consideration,

Heather Merriman
MSSM Class of 1998
Resident of Harpswell