



TESTIMONY BY Jodi Mezzanotte
Director of Educator Engagement, Educate Maine
TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEES ON APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCIAL AFFAIRS AND
EDUCATION AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS
Friday, Feb. 20, 2026, 10:00 a.m.
In favor of An Act Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from
the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State
Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary
to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years
Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees: My name is Jodi Mezzanotte, and I am the Director of Educator Engagement at Educate Maine. I'm here to testify in support of legislation that increases Maine's minimum teacher salary to **\$50,000**, and to underscore why this step is essential for Maine students, Maine communities, and Maine's future workforce.

Educate Maine is a business-led education organization which champions career readiness and education attainment of Maine people by supporting education along the full continuum of life – from early childhood through adulthood. We also offer research and Maine-specific data to help inform your decisions on key education issues.

Maine's educator pipeline and workforce stability are already under real strain. The Teach Maine Center's educator workforce report makes clear that Maine is facing educator shortages driven by fewer people entering the profession and more people leaving, and it warns that staffing gaps worsen working conditions for current educators and can jeopardize student learning and social-emotional development. The report also highlights a workforce that is aging—with just under 10% of teachers under age 30 and 15% over age 60—which means retirements will continue to intensify hiring pressure unless we make teaching in Maine more financially viable.

Compensation is a central lever we can act on now. The Teach Maine Center report notes that Maine educators are paid less than counterparts nationally and in New England, and less than other roles requiring similar education levels. That aligns with national pay data showing Maine's average starting teacher salary in the low \$40,000s and ranking near the bottom nationally. A minimum salary of \$50,000 doesn't make teaching "wealthy"—it makes teaching *possible* for early-career educators who are deciding where to live, whether they can afford student loan payments, and whether they can stay in the profession long enough to become the experienced teachers our students deserve.

Raising the minimum to \$50,000 will help Maine in several concrete ways:

1. **Recruitment: more candidates, a stronger pipeline.** If we want more graduates—and career changers—to choose teaching, the profession has to compete with other fields that require similar degrees and responsibilities.
2. **Retention: fewer vacancies, less churn, stronger schools.** When schools can't retain teachers, students face larger class sizes, fewer course offerings, rotating substitutes, and reduced stability—especially in high-need and rural communities. Stabilizing pay at the entry level is one of the most direct ways to reduce early-career attrition.
3. **Equity across Maine.** A statewide minimum creates a more consistent baseline so that district wealth and geography don't determine whether students can staff classrooms with qualified educators. It's an equity issue for students and for the communities trying to educate them.
4. **A smart investment with real economic return.** Maine's educator workforce is a major statewide workforce—about 14,000 public PK-12 educators—and educators are foundational to Maine's economy because they prepare the future workforce and enable families to work. When educator shortages disrupt schools, the ripple effects touch employers, childcare decisions, and community stability.

This is not a “nice-to-have.” It is a practical response to a workforce problem that is already here. The Teach Maine Center report and related advocacy point to compensation as a key barrier to recruitment and retention, and a \$50,000 minimum salary is a clear, concrete step Maine can take to strengthen the profession and stabilize classrooms.

I respectfully urge you to support this legislation and ensure it is funded in a way that allows districts to implement it without cutting positions or programs. Maine students deserve excellent teachers—and teachers deserve a professional wage that makes it possible to stay.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to Maine's children.