

Corrie Hunkler
Cherryfield
LD 2226

Testimony in favor of LD 2226: An Act to Amend the Essential Programs and Services School Funding Formula

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Corrie Hunkler, I live in Washington County.

I am grateful for all the time and energy that was put into this bill and to the Maine Education Policy Research Institute report that impacted this. This work is long overdue and is a breath of hope after many years of struggle for our rural school districts across our great state of Maine. I have the privilege of testifying today with a few different perspectives, all which will be positively impacted by the passing of this bill.

I grew up on Beals Island and attended Beals Elementary School. I have traveled the world and been in educational environments of all settings. Nothing can compare to my experience as a child attending my community island school. Community based schools create depth to learning that not only allow kids to feel seen and heard, but also pushes them to expand their academic achievement in ways that are tailored to the unique skills and assets they have to contribute to the world. These small rural schools spark curiosity and problem solving skills and connect youth to place. Beals Elementary grounded me, showed me how I can contribute to my community and made me the person I am today. Beals Elementary, Lubec Elementary and so many of our small rural schools in coastal communities and across the state of Maine have had to cut and cut and cut budgets due to the EPS formula valuing their land at high rates as property values have skyrocketed, however the EPS model has not taken into the consideration that these working waterfront communities do not have wealthy people paying their tax base. In Washington County, 60% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. We are communities still made up of working people and our schools are struggling to figure out how to survive.

I currently sit on the school board of Cherryfield Elementary. We are an independent school district with a PreK -8th school (120 students) and we contract with local high schools. After SAD37 voted to close our school in order to save money and consolidate the Junior High students, our community worked tirelessly and voted to remove ourselves from this district. We are a rural working community and our old outdated school has had to take on a few large projects to remain a safe place for students to attend. Our school budget is stretched thin, we do not have music, theatre, gifted & talented, full time art, or any other extra curriculums— we can't add these into our budget when transportation, special education and insurance costs rise every year. Our teachers and staff are in numerous roles and burnout is high. Every year during budget season, our community, though they love our school, is frustrated with the unjust tax burden to townspeople that we rely on to keep our school afloat. We are currently in our 26-27 budget season and are panicking as we do not know how we are going to pass this budget due to one student at our school needing to receive Specialized Care from an institution outside of our district. This \$100,000+ price tag will be a blow to our taxpayers and select board and we are not sure how to proceed as we know we will not get a budget passed as is. Small rural communities should not have to bear these great burdens to keep their schools not thriving, just open.

I am a coach for the Department of Education and I get the great pleasure of traveling around this state to do trainings and support our many different schools. Whether in Oxford County Northern Penobscot, Aroostook or Downeast when you enter our rural schools we feel the same. Our school infrastructure is struggling, our teachers are struggling and our students are struggling. We do not have the extra funds to figure out how to create a school that has the capacity to differentiate the needs of all our students and ensure we have the staff, programming and curriculum in place to

support them. Two weeks ago I had the pleasure of working at a school on Mount Desert Island. Their enrollment is the same as Cherryfield Elementary. During my time there, staff got up and shared about their jazz band, their full-time multiple tiered art program, all the social and emotional supports they are able to provide diverse learners, Gifted & Talented, the many levels of instruction that are happening, and their extracurriculars such as ice skating and gymnastics that they're able to provide. I left there wanting to cry knowing that not even 40 miles away the education of the students, my child included, is so very far below this.

I want to thank you for your time today and thank you for this opportunity to share with you how much good this bill could do across our state in all regions for all students. What I know about rural Maine is that these students love it here and they do not want to leave. To have a public education system funded to support them for the skills needed to live, work and thrive in their communities whether it's fishing or forestry, farming or owning a small business would change the outcome for our youth (the future of Maine). We could have an education to dream and innovate in instead of reacting to budget deficits and crippling setbacks. Thank you for your time and sharing in my dream for the future and our children of Maine.

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