



Preparing ALL Learners For A Changing World

RSU 29

CARES

Pre-K Through Community Education

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Superintendent of Schools

March 6, 2026

To the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony on LD 2226: An Act to Amend the Essential Programs and Services School Funding Formula, known as EPS. I want to start out by thanking all the committee members and superintendents who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to explore options for the EPS formulas to be adjusted. Special thanks to Jeremy Ray, Superintendent of Schools for Biddeford and Dayton School Departments for focusing on the Zip Code Crisis in Maine Schools, highlighting that a child's zip code should not determine their educational experience.

Before I share what we are experiencing in RSU 29, I want to also stress the importance of continued funding for public education in Maine and that any changes must be carefully considered, and align with the promise of 55% or even more funding from the legislature. The other item I would ask is that we focus on the positives of public education as every school is doing the best they can with the funding they receive to help students succeed. This should not be a partisan issue, we all need to focus on children in our communities.

RSU 29 is formed by the towns of Hammond, Houlton, Littleton, and Monticello. In RSU 29 we have experienced challenging fiscal times. We also realize enrollment continues to decrease. The district closed K-6 schools in Littleton and Monticello. We currently have three buildings in our district including Houlton Elementary School Pre-K-2 (284 students), Houlton Southside School 3-6 (339 students), and Houlton Middle High School 7-12 (555 students). We are also a part of an Educational Service Center (ESC), along with MSAD 70, RSU 50, RSU 84, RSU 89, and Region Two CTE. I am proud to also serve as the Executive Director of that organization titled the Southern Aroostook Area Regional Service Center. Together we share services for a 9-12 alternative school, a bus garage, and a substitute training program.

I have been in this district for over thirty years as a music educator, Adult Education Director, Director of Operations, and now Superintendent. I have witnessed how RSU 29 has always been a high receivership of state funds and appreciate all that we receive from the state. The challenge now is we are exceeding the formula for those funds as costs continue to rise, valuations of properties out pace the formula, mill rates decrease affecting required local shares, and tax payers are concerned with additional local funding.

RSU 29 Budget History:

The following spreadsheet shows how RSU 29 Budget increased over the years and included the fact enrollment dropped, mill rate decreased, required local decreased over time, required state increased over time, and additional local fluctuated. For five years in a row, RSU 29 only used required state and local funds for the bulk of their budget. Just recently voters were faced with increasing additional local funds, something they never had to face. In 2024 over 400 residents showed up to our face to face budget referendum, with some ready to cut funding, while others were there to continue to support. We are in contentious times.

Multi Year Budget Comparison							
Year	Budget	Enrollment Oct 1	Mill Rate	Required State Contribution	Required Town Contribution	Add'l Local	Total Local
2014-2015	\$ 12,751,397.00	1351	8.10	\$ 9,240,465.00	\$3,267,279.00	\$ -	\$3,267,279.00
2015-2016	\$ 12,874,619.00	1331	8.48	\$ 8,936,774.00	\$3,578,838.00	\$ 158,116.94	\$3,736,954.94
2016-2017	\$ 13,157,272.00	1361	8.30	\$ 8,798,162.00	\$3,274,626.00	\$ 111,982.13	\$3,386,608.13
2017-2018	\$ 13,248,771.00	1371	8.19	\$ 9,670,242.00	\$3,237,234.00	\$ 200,000.00	\$3,437,234.00
2018-2019	\$ 13,986,075.00	1399	8.48	\$ 10,170,393.00	\$3,354,264.00	\$ -	\$3,354,264.00
2019-2020	\$ 14,629,235.00	1380	8.28	\$ 10,593,252.00	\$3,220,782.00	\$ -	\$3,220,782.00
2020-2021	\$ 15,157,592.00	1336	8.18	\$ 11,244,935.00	\$3,187,064.00	\$ -	\$3,187,064.00
2021-2022	\$ 15,344,683.00	1269	7.26	\$ 11,591,045.00	\$2,874,597.00	\$ -	\$2,874,597.00
2022-2023	\$ 15,502,297.00	1262	7.10	\$ 11,706,817.00	\$2,902,480.00	\$ -	\$2,902,480.00
2023-2024	\$ 15,714,892.00	1248	6.97	\$ 11,645,779.51	\$2,974,099.01	\$ 260,013.00	\$3,234,112.01
2024-2025	\$ 16,896,576.41	1197	6.62	\$ 11,661,188.63	\$2,968,408.00	\$ 1,222,782.58	\$4,191,190.58
2025-2026	\$ 17,781,176.74	1161	6.10	\$ 12,505,508.67	\$2,941,826.67	\$ 1,249,636.91	\$4,191,463.58

Where do we go from here?

2026-2027	?	1161	5.645	\$ 12,599,555.09	\$ 2,943,208.93	?	\$ 2,943,208.93
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Bargain Basement

RSU 29 has been so fiscally efficient and conservative out of necessity and normalcy that we currently are **THE LOWEST** school district on the list for per pupil expenditures. Out of the 258 reporting districts and towns, we sit at 248, 11th from the bottom. Our neighboring MSAD 70 District sits at 245. We are in an impoverished area and understand there is not much more our tax payers may be able to do.

Resident Expenditures FY 2024-2025 Per Pupil Amounts (under \$14,200)			
235	Roque Bluffs	\$ 14,169.53	14
236	Maine Connections Academy	\$ 14,159.96	405
237	RSU 68/MSAD 68 Dover Foxcroft	\$ 14,098.98	933
238	Robbinston	\$ 14,076.24	73
239	Wesley	\$ 14,050.27	18
240	Baring Plantation	\$ 13,993.74	29
241	Denniston Plantation	\$ 13,902.34	10
242	Woodville	\$ 13,838.25	34
243	MSAD 10	\$ 13,794.87	22
244	Maine Academy of Natural Sciences	\$ 13,776.50	177
245	MSAD 70 Hodgdon	\$ 13,615.13	448
246	Ecology Learning Center	\$ 13,273.93	120
247	Whitneyville	\$ 13,069.41	29
248	RSU 29	\$ 12,958.23	1186
249	Baxter Academy for Technology and Science	\$ 12,933.48	384
250	Cherryfield	\$ 12,921.74	151
251	Maine Arts Academy	\$ 12,744.86	245
252	Marshfield	\$ 12,724.87	74
253	Community Regional Charter School	\$ 12,691.22	365
254	Acadia Academy	\$ 12,634.11	250
255	Medford	\$ 11,976.45	45
256	Maine Virtual Academy	\$ 11,624.46	439
257	Reed Plantation	\$ 10,120.68	10
258	Lakeview Plantation	\$ 6,985.62	11

RSU 29 Budget Challenges

Since 2022, RSU 29 has had to cut 30 positions representing teachers, custodians, ed techs, co curricular stipends, all which total to around approximately \$2.8 million dollars. We have become as efficient as possible. In fact, due to budget reductions last year, our current six grade class size is 27 to 28 kids per classroom. We have focused on keeping four teachers per grade level at the K-6 level and can not cut anymore. Recent cuts forced us to reduce physical education and music one position each in 2025. The largest classes of students are going to be at Houlton Middle High School over these next several years, and any further cuts in staffing would force us to eliminate tech ed (shop classes), reduce core class, and cut elective offerings. Every reduction and loss of classes forces students into a non-working schedule as there are not enough sections throughout the day to meet the needs. The next step in savings is to eliminate athletics or move to a pay to play system.

Why do we need help through EPS changes?

As costs continue to rise, RSU 29 is going to max out the capacity of our tax payers. Although valuations continue to increase, the lowered Mill rate creates a wash of the calculation. Even if valuations continue to rise, there are no new tax payers or businesses to keep up as a tax base to address rising costs. Valuation does not truly represent the tax base in RSU 29.

3 Year Evaluation	25-26 to 26-27 Increase	
Town	\$\$	%
Hammond	\$ 466,667.00	4.94%
Houlton	\$ 29,033,333.00	8.42%
Littleton	\$ 5,450,000.00	8.13%
Monticello	\$ 4,166,667.00	6.85%
TOTAL INCREASE	\$ 39,116,667.00	8.11%

	3 Yr Average			Required		Incr/Decr
Town	State Valuation	Mill	Mill	Local Effort	Percent	Since 25-26
Hammond	\$ 9,916,667.00	5.645	0.005645	\$ 55,979.59	1.90%	(1,665.41)
Houlton	\$ 374,000,000.00	5.645	0.005645	\$ 2,111,230.00	71.73%	6,933.33
Littleton	\$ 72,500,000.00	5.645	0.005645	\$ 409,262.50	13.91%	257.50
Monticello	\$ 64,966,667.00	5.645	0.005645	\$ 366,736.84	12.46%	(4,143.16)
TOTAL	\$ 521,383,334.00	5.645	0.005645	\$ 2,943,208.92	100.00%	\$1,382.25

Costs increases are driving more demand for additional local. Everything from personnel costs, energy, special education, and state mandates are calculated into an ever increasing bottom line. RSU 29 sees budgets continue to increase like every school, the issue is the tax base can not keep up in our rural communities. State valuation is not a true measure of towns being able to pay for education. Dropping the mill rate also pushes the required local down, yet we still need additional local to make up the difference.

Mandatory Costs

Every school in Maine faced mandatory costs set by the Maine Legislature despite us having collective bargaining agreements to address personnel needs.

- Maine Paid Family Medical Leave Act has affected budgets and increased leave status for our employees beyond the collective bargaining agreement, while causing districts and employees to have to put money aside for MPFML
- State Law LD 974, increase of salary for Ed Techs at 125% above minimum wage to \$18.31 and Support Staff 115% above minimum wage to \$16.85. The state promised one year of support, which is still being calculated for RSU 29, and still not amount to a large amount of funding to come to RSU 29.
- Earn Paid Leave, has costs district more funding to cover staff who take days away from work under EPL, while the school scrambles to find and pay for subs.
- Proposed increase in mandatory minimum teacher salaries to \$50,000 with no guarantee of increase in state funding to offset costs.

These above benefits and salary increases may help to attract staff to work for school districts, but the fact that the increase was not supported by changes to EPS or state funding for long term solutions places all of this back on the district to contend with over many years to come. Our increase in personnel into next year is \$213,000.

Solutions

Budgets and funding are a challenge, but RSU 29 has always addressed concerns with solutions.

- Formed the Southern Aroostook Area Regional Service Center (SAARSC) in 2018 to address efficiencies and share resources with MSAD 70, RSU 50, RSU 84, RSU 89, and Region Two CTE.
- Became one of 18 school districts to be part of cohort one for Early Childhood Special Education. Our process is to get to students earlier to address needs for long term benefits. Many students had zero services.
- School Revolving Renovation Funds were granted during the 2025 process, thus allowing us to get ready to go to referendum in 2026 to repair three of our buildings with \$1.9 million of funds with 70% funded by the state. This will address removing asbestos in Houlton Elementary and Houlton Middle High School, plus improve insulation and building envelope at Houlton Southside so we do not have freeze ups and damages.
- Applied in 2017 and again in 2025 for a new elementary school. We currently are sixth on the list, with the goal to consolidate two buildings by using construction funding for an addition onto Houlton Southside School to have one building as a Pre-K through six building.
- Applied in 2017 and again in 2025-2026 for the 9-16 consolidated high school with our current partners Hodgdon High School and Region Two CTE. We know consolidation has potential to save costs in the long run. Our project will reutilize funds to connect and renovate Houlton Middle High School and Region Two CTE for a one campus design to address future educational needs.
- SAARSC applied for USDA Distance Learning Grant, and received a \$1 million grant starting in 2026 shared with all the schools in the region.

Still Not Enough

Despite being efficient and innovative as a district, there is not enough funding from Maine and our local districts to continue to keep up with the costs associated with a rural, high poverty district. We continue to see costs rise which we can not keep up with. For example, we currently pay over \$720,000 for students to attend out of district special purpose private schools to address special education needs, including behavioral issues.

Needs

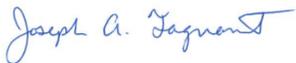
It is time for the State of Maine to look at the balance within the educational funding model. The taxpayers in RSU 29 understand the concept of the required local share earns state funding. They are struggling to meet the additional local share that keeps rising. LD 2226 would address some of these needs.

RSU 29 is facing another budget shortfall as we finalize the 2026-2027 budget and will make some challenging decisions. It is not a matter of cutting extra, it is now a matter of cutting programs directly related to supporting students. This includes not being able to hire a social worker we desperately need, looking at cutting programming through teacher reductions at Houlton Middle High School, and cutting sports programs from the district budget, thus forcing parents to have to pay to play.

There are no easy solutions. The idea behind looking into the EPS funding formula was to generate conversations, data, and opportunities. I ask that the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee strongly support moving this bill from the committee to the floor for a full state wide approach to looking at funding schools. Any positive movement on this bill would support major funding changes throughout Maine. If the State of Maine truly wants to balance the Zip Code Crisis and treat all children equally, then LD 2226 must be supported.

I thank you for your time and dedication to the students of Maine. I know education is the way to address our workforce needs and to break the cycle of generational poverty. We need more funding support for public education to truly move Maine forward.

Submitted by,



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Hammond, Houlton, Littleton, Monticello