

Senator Rafferty and members of the Committee of Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Azalea, and I am writing to you today as a taxpayer and member of my town's Select Board. I am strongly urging you to take action to amend the Essential Programs and Services School Funding Formula.

I have been serving my fellow residents on the Buckfield Select Board since 2022. In the 4 years I have served in this capacity, almost every conversation I have related to my work on the Select Board is related to our property taxes. ~60% of our property taxes go into our education system.

Buckfield is a small, quiet, and aging village. For many it is a place they have called home for decades. The seniors and disabled residents of my town benefit from our location as it is close to many medical providers. It is unlike other rural communities that see similar levels of economic activity, which are often more isolated, creating a hardship for those who need medical care. Our elderly population is our town's lifeblood, uplifting others in the community with potluck dinners and fundraisers, sharing stories and pictures of days gone by to remind us of more prosperous days in our village.

Every single one of them who is no longer physically capable of working for a wage is at risk of losing their homes, often generational ones.

It is not because our municipal budget is teeming with their monies - at the municipal level, we are often shooting ourselves in the foot when it comes to issues of capital improvement or investment in infrastructure. We often can't even consider providing additional services beyond a recreation department, which relies heavily on the volunteer hours of dedicated parents. This is because we see and hear of the dire straits that members of our community live in as they decide between paying their property taxes, buying nutritious food, heating their whole home or just part of it for the winter, and being able to pay for the maintenance and repair of what are often historic family farmhouses.

Because the Town is desperate to look for avenues of cost savings, the voters decided to explore school withdrawal in hopes that with local control by people who live in the community would be able to tame school spending, believing that our RSU administrators who are 40 minutes away in Rumford do not have a big enough stake in our community to make budget decisions with the people I mentioned before in mind. But now that we have secured an Education Consultant with decades of experience building budgets for schools big and small, we have learned from her that much of this lies in legally required education expenditures, informant us that "if saving money is [our] primary goal, [we] will be disappointed."

I testify before this committee with the eyes and words of my community's elders behind mine. As a 28 year old, living affordably has drastically changed since I graduated from our community school in 2016. The days of paying a few hundred a month in rent are long behind us, with rates often exceeding \$1200 a month even in this community. But I am one of the lucky ones. I have an able body that is able to sustain multiple jobs to make ends meet, and leave a little for saving. However, I can not ignore the members of my community at large who are not able to benefit from this same gift.

We value our education here. The teachers that taught me throughout adolescence remain in those same hallways, underpaid but yet dedicated to meeting the needs of our rural youth. I and so many others have no interest in replacing their contracts until they are ready to retire or depart from our schools of their own volition. They have fostered education over decades for thousands of our students with passion, zeal, creativity and care.

We want to support our schools fully. We just can't afford to.

It is my hope that this Committee and Legislature can do what so many of our seniors need to survive, so they can live dignified lives in their generational homes. Every one of these historic farmhouses that is neglected out of financial necessity is another home that cannot be passed on to the next generation, further driving the housing crisis that the State continues to experience. While we hope in the future to see a full divorce of school funding from property taxes, I urge the committee to act on the proposal which is now before them. Our seniors and disabled neighbors can't afford to wait for that day to come.

Thank you for your consideration,  
Azalea Cormier