

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee: my name is Anny Fenton. I live in Portland, and I am testifying in support of LD 2226.

I'm the parent of a second grader in Portland, but I'm also a product of RSU 18. I grew up in Oakland, next to Waterville, and graduated from Messalonskee High School.

I loved where I grew up, largely because of school. Our middle and high schools drew from four towns, but we first attended small rural elementary schools. It felt like the best of both worlds—tight-knit groups coming together to form one larger community where everyone still knew everyone. People are often surprised when I tell them that the only fight during my time in high school was between two sisters who will remain unnamed.

Of course, things were not perfect. Our community faced poverty and everything that comes with it. Many of my friends' parents struggled with substance use, and eventually some of my friends did too. Some were abused, and others struggled to get regular meals. But five days a week, we all had the stability and promise of school. Our building felt clean, safe, bright, and cared for. Our teachers' abilities could vary, but every single one of them cared about us. It always felt like they had the time and capacity to support us. In short, school was a sanctuary.

For most of my life, I assumed Portland schools must be completely different. Like many people from central Maine, I imagined Portland as a large, wealthy city with abundant resources and cutting-edge programs.

But now that my child attends school here, I see something more familiar—and more complicated. Like Messalonskee, my child's school is a small neighborhood school where everyone knows everyone and teachers care deeply about the kids. But the challenges are far greater. I thought I was familiar with poverty because I grew up in one of those "poor rural Maine school," but, my child's school has shown my naivete. One in five children at her school has experienced homelessness and nearly two-thirds of students are economically disadvantaged, compared to about a quarter where I grew up. On top of that, about half the students are multi-lingual learners, which will eventually be a strength for them, but right now it means kindergarten teachers are trying to teach students to read when most of the class doesn't speak the same language.

I want to be clear. I adore my child's school, in large part because of its diversity. But I'm also pragmatic. Students facing poverty, housing instability, and language barriers need more resources to reach the same opportunities as students who are housing secure and speak English at home. And in some parts of Maine, it simply costs more to provide those resources.

LD 2226 better reflects these realities. Districts like Portland—as well as communities like Waterville and Winslow near where I grew up—would receive resources that match their students' needs, while districts like my hometown would see roughly the same funding.

That feels right to me. Because every student in Maine deserves what my school gave me and my friends: a sanctuary.