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Public Testimony 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 Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Representative Tiffany Strout from Harrington, representing the towns of Milbridge, Harrington, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Centerville, Addison, Jonesport, Beals, Jonesboro, Roque Bluffs, Whitneyville and Machias in beautiful Washington County and I am here today to testify in support of LD 2226 – **An Act to Amend the Essential Programs and Services School Funding Formula.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in strong support of LD2226, a bill that proposes long-overdue reforms to Maine's Essential Programs and Services (EPS) school funding formula.

The current EPS formula focuses heavily on property evaluations which may not be an accurate reflection of the economics of those who live and support the property being evaluated. Here are a few examples that have been overlooked. First, it does not account for the genuine cost differences of delivering education in rural, remote Washington County — where transportation alone can exhaust a budget before a single teacher is hired. Second, it calculates a community's "ability to pay" primarily through property values — a metric that can make coastal Washington County towns appear wealthier than they are, saddling local taxpayers with a disproportionate burden. As one recent analysis noted, oceanfront towns in Washington County can appear "wealthy" on paper, but those valuations do not reflect the realities of year-round working families. Third, the weighting for economically disadvantaged students has not kept pace with the actual concentration and depth of need in districts like ours. When a supermajority of students arrive, each morning carrying the weight of poverty, a modest supplemental weight is not enough to close the gap.

The towns I represent sit in one of the most economically challenged corners of our state. Washington County carries a poverty rate of approximately 18 percent — the highest of any county in Maine — and childhood poverty in our county reaches close to 27 percent among families with young children.

In Whitneyville, nearly 89 percent of enrolled students qualify as economically disadvantaged. Jonesport sits at 74 percent. Beals at 72 percent. Machias at nearly 70 percent. MSAD #37, which serves Harrington, Addison, Centerville Township, Columbia, Columbia Falls, and Milbridge, has 66 percent of its students qualifying as economically disadvantaged. In Jonesboro, Roque Bluffs, and across the district, these numbers tell a consistent story: our children are growing up in poverty, and our schools are often the only institutions standing between them and a future shaped entirely by circumstance.

This bill will address 3 provisions that I believe are most important to the students and communities I represent.

1. The Regional Adjustment. This provision updates the method for calculating the regional cost-of-living adjustment and anchors it to a nationwide cost index applied to teacher salary and other instructional staff costs. For rural Washington County districts, the current regional adjustment does not come close to reflecting what it actually costs to recruit and retain qualified teachers in a remote area. By tying the adjustment to real-world cost data and aligning it with the salary matrix, LD 2226 ensures that the formula reflects what it actually costs to educate a child here — not what it costs in Falmouth or Cape Elizabeth.

2. The 90/10 Income-Adjusted Ability to Pay. The bill inserts an income indicator — based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students — into the calculation of a school administrative unit's required local contribution. This reform acknowledges what our communities have long known: that property value is not the same

District 11 Addison, Beals, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Harrington, Jonesboro, Jonesport, Machias, Milbridge, Roque Bluffs, Whitneyville, Centerville Township, and North Washington (Part)

as community wealth. A town can sit on a beautiful stretch of coastline and still have 70 percent of its children qualifying for free or reduced-price meals. Adjusting the local contribution calculation for income levels will reduce the crushing property tax burden on families in towns like Jonesport, Machias, and Harrington, while more accurately measuring what communities can genuinely afford to contribute.

3. The Increased and Variable Weight for Economically Disadvantaged Students. LD 2226 replaces the flat additional weight for economically disadvantaged students with a variable weight — ranging from .15 to .35 — determined by an index developed by a statewide education policy research institute. This creates a more nuanced and responsive calculation that better reflects the depth and concentration of poverty in a given district. As Maine School Funding: The Zip Code Crisis has made clear, children born in high-poverty districts face a fundamentally different set of barriers than children born in more affluent communities — and the formula must reflect that reality. Moving toward the national standard for economically disadvantaged weights would make a genuine difference in what schools like those in Machias, Whitneyville, and Jonesport can offer their students.

I am a current member of the MSAD#37 School Board and know firsthand the struggles of putting together a budget to be able to offer students an enriched education experiences that offers them opportunity to succeed once they have graduated. As we look to build the 2026 – 2027 budget, we were just informed the projected school subsidy for the coming school year is down ~\$8,500. In addition, each of our costal towns will have an approximate increase in contribution of \$52,000 to \$54,000. This additional cost increase is not considering the minimum \$50,000 teacher salary that will be another mandate handed down by the state in the supplemental budget.

I also participated in the Washington County Budget Committee where we had to work through the possibility of our county shutting down due to mismanagement of tax money for 5 years resulting in an approximate \$8,000,000 shortfall. That short fall had to be covered by an increase in property taxes because it is property tax that also funds our county government.

The reality is there is only so much money to cover the cost of so many much-needed entities. I am very proud to live in my community, and I do believe I live in the most beautiful district with hard working people that do their best to participate and contribute, putting education of our students as a priority. The funding formula as it is currently punishes people who have lived in homes and owned land for generations, most who have worked and have made or are still making their living on the water. If the formula is not modified, they will be taxed out of their homes which will move them away from their jobs, creating more economic hardships for them and the community. This bill provides an opportunity to answer the question of not whether Maine's rural students deserve equitable opportunity — but whether our funding formula will finally reflect that they do.

Thank you for your time today and I would be glad to answer any questions.

Sincerely,



Tiffany Strout
State Representative