

## Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer  
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

### Testimony

#### In Support Of

**LD 258: An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025.**

**John Kosinski, Government Relations Director, Maine Education Association**

**Before the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee**

**February 13, 2023**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and other esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and other esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is John Kosinski (he/him) and I am proud to serve as the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents 24,000 educators in the state of Maine, including teachers and other professionals in nearly every public school in the state and faculty and other professional staff in the University of Maine and Community College Systems.

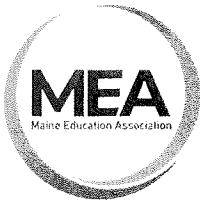
I am here to testify on behalf of the MEA in support of the preK-12 public education proposals contained in LD 258: An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025.

We have said it before and I will say it again – thank you to Governor Mills and the Legislature for finally meeting its obligation to public schools, students, educators and local communities by funding 55% of the cost of public schools. For two decades now, the MEA has advocated for the state to fulfill its obligation as passed by voters in 2004 and reaffirmed in a 2016 ballot initiative by Maine voters. The Governor’s proposed budget maintains 55% state funding for the 23-24 school year. We are grateful for the proposal, and we hope this portion of the Governor’s budget receives bipartisan support to provide the consistent, stable funding public schools need. Thank you.

There are some school leaders struggling with what the 55% state funding of schools means for their schools and their communities given the preliminary figures released last month. There are some school

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districts, particularly in southeastern Maine, losing significant state aid next school year under this proposal. An analysis of the 279s, the preliminary reports, makes clear the driving factor for losing state aid for schools is escalating property values. We can expect this trend will continue as prices continue to climb, particularly in Cumberland County and coastal Maine. The school funding formula recognizes property values as local ability to pay, and as property values continue to climb, those communities will likely struggle with decreases in state aid, meaning either higher property taxes or the proverbial belt tightening.

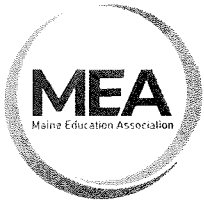
While we are grateful for the maintenance of the 55% state funding of public schools in the Governor's proposal, our public schools face new challenges. Chief among them include significant workforce shortages across the state. Last year, the Legislature made significant changes to the teacher and ed tech certification process, addressing some of the challenges qualified applicants had in obtaining credentials. Despite these changes, which will likely take time but may help see more certified educators, many schools are still struggling to find enough staff to operate the schools appropriately. We feel strongly there must be increases in compensation especially for teachers, ed techs, bus drivers and other support as well as certified staff (such as school counselors, social workers). Changing the standards alone will not address the shortages and retention problems schools face – compensation will. We support efforts to increase the minimum wage for hourly school staff, and we support efforts to further lift the minimum teacher salary. We fully recognize these salary and wage improvements come with a cost to local communities, but we see no other pathway to make sure we have high quality educators in every position in every school in the state. We hope the Committees may consider including a higher minimum wage for all support staff and an increase in the minimum teacher salary in this budget. Both are critical to addressing the immediate and long-term shortages schools are facing. There are multiple bills this session to address both issues, but we strongly recommend both are addressed in the biennial budget.

Another challenge facing schools right now is a growing concern about the overall mental health of students and an escalation in difficult behaviors from students. Every generation seems to think the one before is rife with problems, and it is easy to say "kids these days" and move on, but teachers and educators around the state have raised an alarm about the behaviors they are seeing from students, and there is deep concern about the presentation of mental health concerns from students – depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, bullying. We believe a confluence of factors is contributing to the troubling behaviors educators are observing, including the impact of the COVID pandemic on young students. We hope to see mental health specialists, school counselors, and social workers added to the school funding formula calculations, to help more students and families cope with the mental health and behavioral challenges becoming too prevalent in our schools. We hope the final budget document will include progress on this important issue.

We would also like to point out that we are enthusiastically supportive of the free school meal program the state started last year. The free school meal program ensures all students have access to food while at schools – the program addresses equity and helps prevent hunger from disrupting the learning and

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development of students, at least while they are at school. While we wholeheartedly support this program, there are some downstream impacts of the program that must be considered. Because we are now offering free meals for all students, many families are not competing the free/reduced lunch form required from US Dept of Agriculture. This means the state is leaving federal funds on the table. In addition, because the free/reduced lunch program is no longer a suitable metric to measure student poverty in schools, we must consider a new way to objectively measure need among students in order to prioritize funding and support to these students and to schools with high concentrations of students living at or below the poverty line. Other states that have adopted similar free meals programs have encountered similar issues and are seeking solutions. We hope either in the budget or through other means we find new ways to assess student poverty in our schools and begin building the framework to dedicate resources to students with need and the schools they attend.

Thank you for your time and attention and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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