

Testimony of Emily Albee

April 20, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and other distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Emily Albee. I am a resident of Orono and the 2022 Penobscot County Teacher of the Year. I am an educator and a proud member of the Maine Education Association. I am here today to testify in support of LD 955, 974, 1237, and 1314. These 4 bills are crucial steps to address the compensation inadequacies and retention struggles of our education support professionals, one of the crucial pillars of our Maine public schools.

Schools cannot operate and function without the amazing work and dedicated contributions of education support professionals. The interconnected teamwork and support provided by our ESP's begins for many of our students with their bus driver in the morning. Drivers entrusted with student safety and providing a supportive relationship shapes their school day. For some of our students who struggle with extreme anxiety and attending school, stepping onto that bus feels like summiting Katahdin on a daily basis. For a majority of the school year, students arrive to school with early morning plowed and shoveled school parking lots and sidewalks by our custodial staff for a safe drop off experience. Students walking by the front office, are greeted by administrative assistants who are guaranteed to know their names, providing another anchor for students to feel seen and welcomed into the building. The fabulous kitchen staff working hard to provide nutritious and delicious meals for students to support their physical and academic health. Inside the classroom and resource room, our Education Technicians providing crucial academic and behavioral supports for students with modified instructional and assessment strategies and at times behavior deescalation. After students leave the building, the mostly unseen hard work begins for our custodial staff to clean, fix, and maintain our building while also setting up for events like sports games, concerts, and board meetings.

I have personally witnessed our ESP teammates leaving our school at unprecedented rates. Simply put, education support professionals cannot afford to stay working in the jobs they love, building relationships with students. This heart wrenching decision to leave education is not made lightly. The inadequate salaries of our ESP's are not even close to keeping up with the challenges of inflation, cost of living increases, and other financial pandemic ripple effects. It is a stunning injustice that ESP's are forced into making tough financial choices because heating oil and healthcare expenses cannot happen at the same time, getting food from local food pantries because snow days changed weekly take home earnings, and ESP's not feeling like valued members of the education profession.

The inadequate salaries of ESP's are not recruiting workers to fill employment vacancies leading to unprecedented shortages of ESP teammates in our Maine schools. Bus driver shortages impact the practicality of students getting to and from school and missing out on key student support relationships. I have seen our administrative assistants helping with snow removal and kitchen service duties because of employment shortages. Education technicians are doing more with less as their caseloads increase and they cannot meet all of the academic and behavioral needs of students. Our public schools need appropriately compensated education support professionals to recruit and retain this vital pillar of support for our Maine students. I urge the Committee to unanimously support these 4 bills and vote ought to pass.