



Maine Education Association

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Testimony

In Support of

LD 955 An Act to Address Shortages of School Support Staff by Increasing the Minimum Hourly Wage for Those Staff, and

LD 974 An Act to Establish Minimum Pay for Educational Technicians and Other School Support Staff, and

LD 1237 An Act to Establish a Minimum Hourly Wage for School Support Staff, and Neither For Nor Against

LD 1314 An Act to Establish a Minimum Salary for Educational Specialists, Educational Technicians and School Teaching Professionals

Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs

April 20, 2023

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

My name is Grace Leavitt. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I am serving as President of the Maine Education Association while on leave from teaching Spanish in MSAD 51. I have over 43 years of classroom teaching experience with 20 years as a National Board Certified teacher. The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators in our Maine system of public education in pre-K-12 schools as well as in our institutions of higher education, both the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, along with students in teacher prep programs as well as many retired educators.

I am here to testify on behalf of MEA in support of the following proposals: LD 955 An Act to Address Shortages of School Support Staff by Increasing the Minimum Hourly Wage for Those Staff (as amended), LD 974 An Act to Establish Minimum Pay for Educational Technicians and Other School Support Staff, LD 1237 An Act to Establish a Minimum Hourly Wage for School Support Staff, and Neither For Nor Against LD 1314 An Act to Establish a Minimum Salary for Educational Specialists, Educational Technicians and School Teaching Professionals.

In 2009 an NEA member in Indiana produced a video, "A Day Without ESP"¹. The primary purpose of the video was to make the essential roles of our Educational Support Professionals, our ESPs, in our schools more visible to all--the bus drivers who safely transport our students, the custodians and maintenance staff who keep the buildings and grounds clean and safe, the food service personnel who prepare and serve nutritious meals, the educational technicians who work directly with students to support their learning, often with students with the greatest challenges, and of course, the administrative assistants who are the experts in multitasking and yet know every student's name and often know their parents as well. The video also helped emphasize the need for greater respect for these important staff and for pay commensurate with the work that they do, without which our schools cannot meet the needs of our students, cannot provide the education and the learning environment our students deserve.

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More than a decade later, the need to address the low pay, lack of respect, often difficult working conditions for these ESSENTIAL Support Professionals is ever so much greater. The challenges of the last few years exacerbated the critical shortages of these important staff that we are encountering across the state. Faced with low pay—lower than you may receive at many other jobs requiring less education or expertise or training—added to being stretched beyond your assigned duties to cover for the many vacant positions and then on top of the fact that in many cases these staff must work with students with very challenging behavioral needs, it is not surprising that many simply leave their positions in our schools to seek employment elsewhere, which of course only worsens the problem.

Data published recently by The National Education Association² recently shows that in 2021-2022 44% of our full-time ESPs in Maine earned under \$25,000—and of those, just under half earned less than \$15,000. 6% are below the poverty level, and another 13% are at or just above it. With approximately a third of our ESPs at or very near retirement age there are likely to be additional shortages of these key staff.

Should the adult who helps support our students in their learning, may have to provide assistance with toileting when necessary, may work with a student who is unable to control their own behavior—should this adult not be able to afford to provide for their own children at home? Should they have to work multiple jobs to do so? Should any of our ESPs be expected to continue in this position?

LD 955 will establish a state minimum hourly wage for these important positions, one that is equal to 125% of the state minimum wage—which would be \$17.25 this year since the state minimum wage is now \$13.80.

LD 974 will establish the same increase in a state minimum hourly wage for support staff, but an additional 8%--133% of the state minimum wage or \$18.35—for educational technicians.

LD 1237 will establish a dollar amount of \$17 for the minimum hourly wage beginning in June 2024 which will increase a dollar each year for the next several years, then will increase by the cost of living.

MEA supports any and all of these three proposals and encourages their passage.

LD 1314 provides for a salary equivalent to 200% of the state minimum hourly wage, however it is unclear how the term 'salary' would be applied to staff who are hourly wage earners. If this were to be amended to address that, then MEA would certainly support the proposal for 200% of the state minimum wage becoming the hourly wages for education support staff. Other parts of LD 1314 that we have questions about are 1) some of the positions referred to in LD 1314 are included on most if not all of the negotiated salary schedules for certified positions and should not be included in this proposal; and 2) it is unclear which positions are included in the term 'school teaching professional'. For these reasons we are neither for nor against LD 1314 with the current wording, but would likely support an amended version that would address these points.

It is imperative that these essential staff are finally recognized and respected for the critically important roles that they play in educating our students. It is of the utmost importance that this recognition and respect at least be clearly demonstrated in the compensation they receive. It is time.

MEA urges your support for these improvements to the hourly wages of education support professionals in Maine.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdvqQ39uSZs>

²NEA ESP Data Book: A Work Force Profile of Education Support Professionals; December 2022, National Education Association