

Testimony of Beverly Uhlenhake, Brewer
In support of LD 1458
An Act to Increase Funding to the Maine School of Science and Mathematics
April 24, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Millett, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Educational and Cultural Affairs, my name is Bev Uhlenhake and I'm here to testify in support of LD1458.

I come to you today as a parent of a very bright young man whom I just sent back to Limestone yesterday to finish off his first year at MSSM. I also come to you as a parent of two seventh graders who desperately want to follow in their brother's footsteps.

The staff and board members of MSSM will give you the details of the dollars that are being suggested and how they will be spent, so I'll focus on what's really important for you to understand: what MSSM is for the students, and what MSSM can and should be for the State of Maine.

As someone who keeps themselves informed about many things the State of Maine has to offer, I've known about MSSM for a long time, but I never considered it as an option for my kids. The Brewer school system is amazing. Our kids have had wonderfully individualized experiences in the classrooms where highly qualified teachers are somehow able to challenge the uber-bright students while also supporting kids who struggle. The gifted and talented programs are top-notch, offering everything from deep dives in literature in sixth grade about books that I read in college to activities like the Wind Storm Challenge in collaboration with the University of Maine.

So I was surprised when Ben came to us last year and said that he thought he wanted to apply to attend MSSM. And honestly, I was intimidated. As a product of the public school system and as someone whose family could never and would never consider boarding school, I was out of my comfort zone. I'm so glad Ben pushed me there and beyond because when I think about the experience he is now getting, I can't even imagine a typical high school education for him.

I know I am biased just like any parent. We all think our kids are special and exceedingly bright, and we are all correct. But there are times when we realize our kids are scary intelligent, and we need to do something to make sure they are able to embrace that scary intelligence, be proud of it, and use it.

The students of MSSM are those kids. Some of them, like Ben, have been taking high school classes for a while. When they took their SATs to get into MSSM, many of their scores were in the top 1-5% of all test takers, and I'll remind you that they are taking these students as eighth graders when the vast majority of test takers are juniors and seniors. They aren't just smart kids that need an extra challenge. These are brilliant kids who will run out of

classes to take in their local high schools. They deserve something more. And I think we have an obligation to make it happen.

Because of the geography of the state, there is no way for this to be anything other than a boarding school. When I think about my own personal costs to send my son to MSSM, I know that \$10,000 for room and board is a good investment in his future. But I'm lucky because I can afford it. Even if both daughters go to MSSM, I'll have the ability to get the loans necessary to fund that investment. But super bright kids don't just come from middle income families. Some of the brightest kids come from our poorest families, and they also deserve to have the level of education that comes from a school like MSSM.

The boarding school aspect also means that the school must be a home and a community and a place that can provide the social and emotional support that the kids can't get from family three or more hours away. My master's degree is in higher education/student affairs, and I actually first moved to Maine to work in the University of Maine residence hall system. I know what supports are needed by the eighteen years and older kids that attend college. When considering younger students, the residence hall staff and supports are even more vital and need even greater funding.

As mentioned in my introduction, I also think we need to think about what MSSM can do for Maine. If we take our top students across the state and help them reach even greater potential than could be available at their local schools, what will they bring to Maine over the life of their careers? Will they be the future researchers spending our R&D funds in better ways than we could have expected? Will they be the entrepreneurs who start up the next Fortune 100 company in Maine? Will they be the scientists and engineers who can figure out a solution to the PFAS situation we are in or the municipal solid waste conundrum we are facing in eastern Maine? I've met these students. It's all entirely possible. And actually, it's all entirely possible that they solve these issues while still in high school. MSSM is a future economic driver and the investment in these students are an investment in Maine.

Finally, I want to reiterate the special place MSSM is for Maine and for our kids. We created this thing in the 90s as a wonderful experiment, and it's become so much more. My son talks about courses that are a challenge. He talks about friends who are excited to discuss world current events like the war in Ukraine and how Taiwan situation is similar around the dinner table. He talks about whether he'll take an advanced chemistry class during next year's J-term, or maybe he'll travel with students going to Silicon Valley. These kids are already having an amazing experience. But they need you to fund it in a manner that supports a real education in the 2020s, not as if it were still the 1990s.

Thank you very much for your time today and your consideration for the future of Maine's brightest students.