



MOFGA Testimony in Favor of  
*LD 1682 - An Act to Create a Maine Experiential Education Program*

*April 26, 2023*

Good morning Senators and Representatives on the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Hillary Barter and I work for the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). MOFGA is working to build a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us and extending quality agricultural-based education to young people across Maine is an important way for us to get closer to achieving this mission. I am speaking today in favor of *LD 1682 - An Act to Create a Maine Experiential Education Program*.

This bill would create a Farm & Sea to School Learning Program that would establish a grant program to help fund staff positions focused on outdoor, experiential learning in public schools related to gardens, food and agriculture. The bill also provides for the creation of a staff position within the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to administer the program, coordinate professional development for school garden staff members, and assist with coordinating local food procurement connections between schools and local farms/fisheries.

Here at MOFGA we offer garden-based education to members of the public year-round, both in-person and online, as well as at the Common Ground Fair every September. We partner with the Maine School Garden Network, where one of our Community Education Directors sits on the board. We have been welcoming school groups to our main campus for years where they participate in projects in our gardens and orchards, including many groups of students from the Ecology Learning Center (ELC), Ironwood and MeANS (Maine Academy of Natural Sciences), among others. Don Pendleton, a MOFGA staff member who works regularly with these groups on various outdoor projects, says "You can see the change in the kids when they come here... let them dig in the dirt, or look at bugs, and they are focused. Out here we don't see behavioral problems. For a while I had some bee hives and had several groups over here and they would be mesmerized with the bees. Kids get right into it; they like the freedom, they like being outside."

We are well aware of how meaningful these programs are in terms of enabling more effective learning and better behavioral outcomes for students. Once a school has the chance to trial a garden program and begins to see some of these outcomes manifest themselves - for instance, lower instances of behavioral referrals or more effective science learning - it will likely become easier for them to justify the continued costs of such programs even after grant funds have expired after three years.

We also see *many* connections between the program that this bill would initiate and our goal of supporting the growth of a healthier food system for all.

- A core part of building a healthy food system is building awareness about our current agricultural system. Where does our food come from? What does it look and feel like to be a farmer in Maine today? What does it actually cost to produce quality food - that is,



food grown in a way that allows farmers & farmworkers to make a decent living and respects for ecosystem health and conserves natural resources? These are questions that we need more Mainers to reflect on regularly. This bill would help enable this, as garden educator staff would be trained to help kids “build connections between the food that they, and their communities, produce and the food that they prepare and eat.”

- Exposure to gardening in young kids and teenagers can have lifelong effects – perhaps prompting an interest in farm work, forestry or landscaping as a meaningful career, or an interest (paired with the ability) to grow food for one’s own family, boosting their health and food security. Both have tremendous value.
- We also see this as a justice & equity issue. We know that better-funded school districts are more likely to be able to fund their own gardener educator positions without any grant assistance, offering their students the opportunity to reap all the health, learning and behavioral benefits of this programming. But children in all parts of Maine deserve a quality education. This grant program would help level the playing field so that kids in communities of all kinds could benefit from these opportunities.

Thank you to representative Shaw for sponsoring this legislation, and thank you to all members of this committee for your attention and consideration of this bill today.

*The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We’re a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$90 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine’s next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.*