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TESTIMONY OF MEAGAN SWAY, ESQ.

Ought to Pass – LD 1526

**An Act to Provide Grants to Support Reading Proficiency Programming in Schools**

Submitted to the

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

May 2, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, greetings. My name is Meagan Sway, and I am the Policy Director at the ACLU of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil rights and civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. I am here today to testify in support of LD 1526, which would help close the racial gap in reading proficiency in Maine's schools.

The ability to read is fundamental to a child's education in school. Beyond the learning that books can provide young people, opening their worlds to new concepts or helping them better understand themselves, reading as a skill sets kids up for future learning elsewhere. It is the foundation upon which most later learning occurs. When children are reading below their grade level, they are left out of many of the lessons and experiences that their classmates experience, because they lack the building blocks for those lessons. As time goes on, deficits grow between those who are proficient in reading and those who are not. Research shows that one of the best predictors of future educational achievement and job success is reading ability and being an engaged reader.<sup>1</sup>

This is an issue of race and class equity. In 2019, Black fourth graders had an average score that was 19 points lower than white students' scores, and fourth graders who qualified for the

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Butler SR, Marsh HW, Sheppard MJ, Sheppard JL. Seven-year longitudinal study of the early prediction of reading achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 1985;77(3):349–361.

national school lunch program scored 22 points lower than those who were not eligible.<sup>2</sup> There is much that goes into an equitable school experience, including addressing hostile learning environments proactively and effectively, employing teachers who reflect the diversity of the student body they teach, and curriculum that is honest and engages with multiple cultures and perspectives. For schools to do any of these things, they have to be well resourced. This bill would provide additional resources to shrink inequity in our schools and ensure that some of our most vulnerable children are given the help they need to thrive.

We ask you to vote ought to pass.

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<sup>2</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, The Nation's Report Card 2019 Reading State Snapshot Report Maine Grade 4 Public Schools, available at <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020014ME4.pdf>.