



## Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer  
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

### Testimony

#### In Opposition

**LD 1300 An Act to Give the Governing Board of a Municipality Input into the Budget Developed by a School Board**

#### In Support

**LD 1370 An Act to Simplify the School Budget Validation Process (as amended by the sponsor, Representative Mastraccio)**

**LD 1748 An Act to Reform the School Budget Referendum Process by Limiting the Circumstances in Which Referenda Occur**

**John Kosinski, Government Relations Director, Maine Education Association**

**Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee**

**May 2, 2023**

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

My name is John Kosinski (he/him), and I am proud to serve as the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents 24,000 educators in the state of Maine, including teachers and other professionals in nearly every public school in the state and faculty and other professional staff in the University of Maine and Community College Systems.

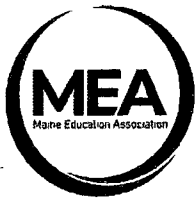
I am here today to testify on behalf of the MEA in **opposition** to LD 1300, *An Act to Give the Governing Board of a Municipality Input into the Budget Developed by a School Board*, in **support** of LD 1370, as amended, *An Act to Simplify the School Budget Validation Process*, and in **support** of LD 1748, *An Act to Reform the School Budget Referendum Process by Limiting the Circumstances in Which Referenda Occur*.

In opposition to LD 1300, *An Act to Give the Governing Board of a Municipality Input into the Budget Developed by a School Board*

The MEA has been consistently frustrated about the current school budget process, particularly in municipal school districts. In these cities, the school budget must first be approved by the school committee and then approved by the city council prior to going to voters for approval. This city council review of the school budget almost always results in school committees being told they need to cut their proposed budgets. In fact, over the past few weeks, the city council in Lewiston has demanded cuts to the Lewiston School budget, this despite the fact the city is receiving \$800,000 more in state aid and

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despite the decline in the required local mil rate. Repeatedly, city councils push school budgets downward before they will allow voters the ability to vote up or down. This is especially frustrating because school board members are often chosen by the exact same voters who decide city council races. The structure seems flawed whereby one set of councilors, elected by the same people, can thwart the ability of school board members to advocate for the budgets their schools need, and their students deserve. (It is important to note, in some cities, the town budget does not require voter approval – only the school budget)

LD 1300 proposes to take this flawed system and apply it to all school districts, including regional school units (RSUs) and school administrative districts (SADs). Not only will this create a bottleneck in seeking voter approval of budgets as each town in a school district is given the opportunity to debate the school budget but will most certainly result in a further ratcheting down of school funding across the state. Any one town council in an RSU or SAD could refuse to allow a budget to go before voters without additional cuts. Given what we have seen in our cities, we can only expect if this proposal moves forward that we will find it even harder to get fair and adequate school budgets approved.

In support of LD 1370, as amended, *An Act to Simplify the School Budget Validation Process and in support of LD 1748, *An Act to Reform the School Budget Referendum Process by Limiting the Circumstances in Which Referenda Occur**

LD 1370, as amended, seeks to simplify the school budget validation process by removing the state mandate to require an election by voters of school budgets.

Already, school board members must be elected by voters to serve and often seats are up for election every three years. What is more, RSUs and SADs must have budget meetings where residents get to learn about the line items proposed in the school budget and get to approve or amend the proposed budget through votes. We encourage the Committee to consider allowing duly elected school board members to establish school budgets through their local process. The bill, as amended, would still allow a local ordinance or charter to require voter approval, but the state will no longer mandate these elections take place. The school budget validation process is a remnant of the school consolidation laws and can and should be replaced.

We also support LD 1748. This too would remove the requirement to hold an election on the school budget every year, and instead empower voters to petition for an election if they feel the budget is not suitable for their town(s). The bill proposes voters in a district submit a petition to the city within 30 days of adoption of the school budget. If enough signatures are collected, an election is held.

Both LD 1370 as amended, and LD 1748 provide a safety valve to address significant community concern about school budgets should concerns arise.

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## **Maine Education Association**

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We all want and support public schools and we want students to thrive. But the current structure for school budgets is cumbersome and complicated and often results in schools not securing the funding they need. Many districts conduct an annual assessment of the funding priorities in their district. They propose a budget to the school board, which often gets whittled down. In some cases, the city council then gets to demand additional cuts. The current structure is inhibiting the ability for school boards to advocate for the budgets they need. Change is in order. We hope the Committee will empower school boards by passing LD 1370 (as amended) and/or LD 1748.

Thank you for your time and your service to the people of Maine. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.

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