



STATE OF MAINE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
23 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, ME 04333-0023

JANET MILLS
GOVERNOR

PENDER MAKIN
COMMISSIONER

May 8, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Senate Chair
Representative Brennan, House Chair
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

As a whole, bills that propose to fund schools with an increasingly limited scope of public input are detrimental to the long-standing and successful democratic process of determining local school budgets. Each bill presented today (LDs 1741, 1798, 1838, 1841, 1860) proposes to reduce funding for public schools in favor of the limited interest of private choice. Lowering the amount of subsidy for local public schools would reduce the state share of local public education, thereby placing more of the burden on our Maine cities and towns. Diverting public funds to private schools in this manner reduces local control over education and accountability of public tax dollars. In addition, diverting subsidy to private schools severely diminishes the ability of Maine public schools to provide equitable access to high quality education for all students.

The Essential Programs and Services (EPS) formula determines both the state and local share of funding needed for each school administrative unit (SAU) as determined by the total cost of public education. The funding formula is designed to respond to public school student needs. In the last biennium, \$68,677,546 was diverted from subsidy to the local communities in order to support the charter and magnet schools in Maine. This funding is subtracted from the total cost of education before the EPS formula calculates schools and state shares for SAUs. Diverting these funds to accounts specifically designated for private schools which may not be approved for the receipt of public tuition creates a dearth of funding for Maine's public schools and jeopardizes the environment of access and equity that Maine strives for. Currently, 45% of General Purpose Aid (GPA) is the tax burden that local communities contribute to the education of their local students. If funding is diverted away from subsidy to support local communities in supporting their local schools the local school would either need to cut programming, services, or staffing, or else the local taxpayers would have to contribute significantly more to maintain schools at current operational levels.

Using public funds for private school tuition limits parental and community input and oversight of education. Because private schools do not have a school board, parents and communities do not have the same amount of access or control over the decisions relating to curriculum or budget initiatives. Private schools are not required to participate in the State accountability system, nor are they required to follow the Maine Learning Results. Further, private schools do not provide the same amount of transparency in their financial disclosures. When tax dollars are invested to support students at private schools, the local taxpayers lose voice and control over school budgets, as private schools are not required to hold a



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referendum to pass their budgets, they don't have to disclose line items and costs in a transparent manner, and they do not involve taxpayer input into their budgeting decisions.

Diverting subsidy from local schools may create a gap in access and opportunity for Maine's neediest students. In addition to the supports and protections provided by IDEA and MUSER, Maine public schools work with students and parents to ensure that they have the resources they need to succeed. Reallocating funding from public schools to private schools will undermine the ability of schools to address the needs of our most vulnerable students. The Department of Education remains committed to supporting equitable access to a high-quality education for all students. These bills jeopardize that promise.

The Department will be available to provide additional information on and respond to any questions during the upcoming work session.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Courtney Belolan", written over a faint, larger version of the same signature.

Courtney Belolan
Director of Policy and Government