



Maine Education Association

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

Testimony

In Support

LD 1702: Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Improve the Educational Experience of People Who Are Resettling in Maine

Mallory Cook, Director of Training and Early Educator Engagement,

Maine Education Association

Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

May 9, 2023

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

My name is Mallory Cook (she/her/hers), and I am the Director of Training and Early Educator Engagement at the Maine Education Association. I am also a certified English teacher and building administrator. On behalf of MEA, a labor union representing almost 24,000 educators, I am here to testify in support of LD 1702: Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Improve the Educational Experience of People Who Are Resettling in Maine.

Early this winter, along with other team MEA members, I sat in one of the most memorable meetings I have attended since taking on this role. The Maine Immigrants' Rights coalition sat before us sharing the challenges faced by newcomers – instability in housing, language barriers, access to healthcare, and many others, but we specifically focused on the challenges for new Maine children attending our public schools. Under federal law, state and local educational agencies are required to provide all children with equal access to elementary and secondary education, but as data and the experiences they shared suggest, we are not yet consistently providing an equitable experience for those resettling in Maine. As was explained during the meeting, we are using “traditional education to meet the needs of an untraditional group”. What I remember most about this meeting was a stern demand: the system is falling behind. Not the kids. We have to slow down. We have to change.

Last week, I sat before this committee as we heard hours of testimony around literacy – that it is a human right; that it has implications on an individual's health, success, income, and relationships. Data was shared demonstrating that in the 21-22 school year, 49.3% of Multi-Lingual Learners were below or well-below the state average in English Language Arts. Even more concerning is that 61.2% of Multi-Lingual Learners were below or well-below the state average in Math, and 96.5% were below or well-below the state average in Science. The MEA's vision is a great public school for every Maine student, and these numbers show there is work to be done. We know there are districts in our state that have dedicated time and resources to meeting the needs of our multi-lingual learners, and their expertise will be of great value as we seek to expand those supports across the state.

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While circumstances for resettling in Maine vary, asylum seekers and refugees have a much higher rate of adverse experiences, which impact their ability to perform in school and have ramifications on their mental and physical health. In addition to these experiences and navigating a new culture and school, these students are met with feelings of failure and defeat when curricula are inaccessible. As students with Dyslexia made clear last week, this can have substantial impacts on mental health and confidence.

Much like other bills this session, we know solutions to such complex challenges cannot be solved instantaneously; however, there is urgency in addressing this inequity. That's why, as called for in this bill, we believe a commission of 16 members would be beneficial in developing a report with findings and recommendations to support students resettling in Maine. You will notice the composition of the commission includes families and students with first-hand experience of the barriers that exist, professionals with an understanding of available supports, educators, and legislators; this diverse body of experiences and knowledge will be essential in producing sound recommendations that are feasible.

Thank you for your time, and I'll do my best to answer any questions you may have.