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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Tuesday, May 9th, 2023

Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
LD 1702, Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Improve the Educational Experience of People Who Are Resettling in Maine
Before the Joint Select Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs, I am Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 118 which is the Portland peninsula. I also have the distinct honor of serving as the Maine Speaker of the House. I am here today to present **LD 1702, Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Improve the Educational Experience of People Who Are Resettling in Maine.**

As you are no doubt aware, Maine has seen an uptick in the number of asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants coming to our great state. This bill is an attempt to get the stakeholders together to better understand ways public schools can help meet the needs of these populations.

Asylum seekers and refugees are coming from all over the world to Maine – Afghanistan, Iraq, Angola, Congo, South America and beyond. Many are leaving unstable and unsafe environments, fleeing war or unrest and they come here seeking peace and freedom. Their journey to get here may be full of trauma – the leaving their homeland, the often-harrowing journey itself, and the may experience all along the way.

LD 1702 would establish a Commission to improve the educational experience for many new permanent residents in Maine who will be sitting next to many of our students in our classrooms. The Commission is tasked with removing barriers to participate and transition successfully into our public schools, and to also develop recommendations to improve their experience so that they are able to succeed in joining our next bright generation of young leaders.

District 118: Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale and the University of Southern Maine Campus

Asylum seekers, refugees and new immigrants bring with them new challenges and public schools and educators in our schools need more support to help these students overcome their challenges. Some as obvious and isolating as not knowing the language everyone in the room is speaking. Others can be technological, cultural, social, or even getting used to a new and rigorous daily schedule. Schools will need better help and supports to help navigate with students and their families as we welcome more people from all over the world.

I hope this Commission will center the voices of those families resettling here, along with the voices of educators in the field and organizations that support asylum seekers and new Mainers. We need the key stakeholders – students, parents, educators, school boards, community organizations – telling us about their real lived experiences so we can better fashion tools and proposals to help them.

This challenge is not new. Some school districts have been working on meeting the needs of new immigrants for years. Of course, we can learn from the experience of big city school districts like Portland and Lewiston who have an established understanding of what more we can and should be doing. But, we should also be looking to Sanford and Narraguagus who are also working non-traditional student populations.

I have one minor edit to the bill. On line 1, at the top of page 2 of the bill, you will see:

A. One member with expertise in issues affecting maternity and postpartum care for asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants;

We feel this may not be needed and suggest the Committee remove that appointment to the Commission. Considering the number of adults who participate in adult education centers in our public schools, we would prefer that this member be replaced with:

A. One member who is a teacher in a public school with expertise as an adult education instructor with a population of people who have resettled in the State, selected from a list of nominees by a statewide labor organization representing teachers in the State.

I thank you for your time and attention this afternoon and ask that you act favorably on LD 1702. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.