

## **Testimony of Faye Gmeiner, Kennebunk, ME**

### **LD 1861: An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Faye Gmeiner. I am testifying on behalf of the Board of Count ME In, a Maine non-profit, working statewide to improve student attendance and decrease chronic absence.

We are in favor of LD 1861: An Act to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism because it would continue the existing focus and structure established through the Federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Maine Department of Education is using attendance data as one of the indicators in its ESSA plan. It is collecting data statewide and includes chronic absence numbers on its data dashboard. The data show that over 45,000 Maine students were chronically absent during the 2021-2022 school year.

The work is not done. We cannot be content when over 25% of our students are missing 10% or more of the school year. LD 1861 would align State statutes with current ESSA practices and ensure that the structures in place continue.

Chronic absence is not just a high school and middle school challenge, but the challenges of chronic absence are more difficult to address if the student has been chronically absent since elementary school. The impact of chronic absence is cumulative, and the interventions needed are often more complex by middle school. Identifying elementary level students who have missed 10% or more of the school year to date can prevent the long-term effects of chronic absence on learning, social emotional skills, and school completion. If we encourage attendance and address chronic absence in our youngest students, they will be more likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade, feel better about themselves as learners and members of a classroom community, and continue to attend consistently.

Maine has developed a structure for collecting, analyzing, and reporting chronic absence data. This is a sound foundation for meeting the challenges of reducing chronic absence. LD 1861 would ensure that schools exceeding the thresholds in the bill use a team process to regularly review the data and address the needs of students who are chronically absent. The structure of a team model, perhaps an existing team that also has other areas of focus, can help ensure that the school is responsive and successful in its efforts – and, most importantly, that fewer students are missing more than 10% of the school year and the many supports and instruction that their schools can provide.

It's much easier to continue work that is already in progress. We support LD 1861 because it builds on a strong foundation that is data-based and can help

Maine schools meet the challenges of reducing our high incidence of chronic absence.

I appreciate the opportunity to share our perspectives about this bill. If you would like further information or have questions, please contact me at [fayeygmeiner@gmail.com](mailto:fayeygmeiner@gmail.com).