



MOFGA Testimony In Support Of
LD 1817 - *An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing
the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program*
May 10, 2023

Good morning Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). MOFGA is working to build a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. We extend quality, agriculture-based education to young people across Maine. I am speaking today in favor of LD 1817 - *An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program*.

This bill would fund immersive outdoor education for Maine's fourth through eighth graders, providing \$6.2 million in each of Maine's fiscal year 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 for partnerships between the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension and Maine's school administrative districts. It would support the health and wellness of students by expanding interdisciplinary education opportunities, physical activity, and fresh air in natural settings. We are particularly excited about the opportunities that this legislation would provide for encouraging students to learn about healthy, local, organic and sustainable food and agriculture systems.

At MOFGA we offer garden-based education to members of the public year-round, both in-person and online, as well as at the Common Ground Fair every September. We partner with the Maine School Garden Network, where one of our Community Education Directors sits on the board. Since 1998, we have been welcoming school groups to our Common Ground Education Center where they participate in projects in our gardens and orchards, including many groups of students. Students from the Ecology Learning Center, Ironwood and Maine Academy of Natural Sciences are regular visitors and participants in our educational programs. Don Pendleton, a MOFGA staff member who works regularly with these groups on various outdoor projects, says "You can see the change in the kids when they come here. Let them dig in the dirt, or look at bugs, and they are focused. Out here we don't see behavioral problems. For a while I had some bee hives and had several groups over here and they would be mesmerized with the bees. Kids get right into it, they like the freedom, they like being outside."

We are well aware of how meaningful these programs are in terms of enabling more effective learning and better behavioral outcomes for students. Once a school has the chance to trial a garden program and begins to see some of these outcomes manifest themselves - for instance, lower instances of behavioral referrals or more effective science learning - it will likely become easier for them to justify the continued costs of such programs even after grant funds have expired after three years.

We also see many connections between the program that this bill would initiate and our goal of supporting the growth of a healthier food system for all.



A core part of building a healthy food system is building awareness about our current agricultural system. Where does our food come from? What does it look and feel like to be a farmer in Maine today? What does it actually cost to produce quality food - that is, food grown in a way that allows farmers and farmworkers to make a decent living, and that respects ecosystem health and conserves natural resources? These are questions that we need more Mainers to reflect on regularly. LD 1817 could support the growth of a healthy and fair food system, as it could help kids build connections between the food that they, and their communities, produce and the food that they prepare and eat.

Exposure to gardening in young kids and teenagers can have lifelong effects perhaps prompting an interest in farm work, forestry or landscaping as a meaningful career, or an interest (paired with the ability) to grow food for one's own family, boosting their health and food security. Both have tremendous value.

We also see this as a justice and equity issue. We know that better-funded school districts are more likely to be able to fund their own gardener educator positions without any grant assistance, offering their students the opportunity to reap all the health, learning and behavioral benefits of this programming. But children in all parts of Maine deserve a quality education. This grant program would help level the playing field so that kids in communities of all kinds could benefit from these opportunities.

MOFGA thanks Senator Stacy Brenner for bringing this bill forward and we urge the Committee to support this bill. I would be happy to answer questions if you have any.

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$90 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.