

May 10, 2023

Amara Ifeji, Director of Policy
Maine Environmental Education Association
amara@meeassociation.org



Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

RE: Support of LD 1817, An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleuker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry, my name is Amara Ifeji and I am the Director of Policy with the Maine Environmental Education Association. I am here today on behalf of MEEA to testify in support of LD 1817

MEEA is a nonprofit statewide professional network representing over 1,500 Maine educators, both classroom teachers and community based educators at libraries, museums, and science and nature centers. For forty years we have supported Maine educators in providing high-quality, locally relevant, hands-on experience for Maine youth

The benefits of outdoor education cannot be overstated, and this bill provides an opportunity for more Maine students to reap these positive impacts. A recent analysis of environmental education research by Stanford University found a 98% positive impact from students gaining knowledge from environmental education. It also found students who participate in outdoor education programs score significantly higher on measures of critical thinking. Perseverance, self-confidence, motivation, and leadership are but a few of the skills students report gaining and are crucial skills in the development of the next generation of problem solvers and leaders.

However, less than a quarter of Maine middle school students have the opportunity to connect with our natural heritage through a similar Outdoor School Program. Therefore, LD 1817 is a critical investment in Maine's youth. This piece of legislation provides three years of state funding to ensure every student in Maine can experience an Outdoor School Program at some point between grades 4-8. It creates a pilot program where school districts can apply for funds to partner with one of the state's outdoor education program providers to bring experiential, holistic, and interdisciplinary outdoor education to its students. The bill also prioritizes funding for schools and communities historically underserved by outdoor education, including, but not limited to, tribal nations, students of color, and schools with high numbers of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. There are only a few other programs like this in the country, so passing this bill would continue to put Maine at the forefront of outdoor education innovation.

MEEA urges the committee to support LD 1817. Thank you for the opportunity to comment and I am available to answer questions at any time.