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Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

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

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

My name is Olivia Griset and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Environmental Education Association (MEEA) I am here to **testify in support of LD 1817**. Thank you to Senator Brenner and Representative Carlow for bringing this bill forward, along with the many cosponsors and other supporters including members of this committee

MEEA is a nonprofit statewide professional network representing over 1,500 Maine educators, including classroom teachers as well as community-based educators at libraries, museums, overnight environmental education program providers and science and nature centers For over forty years we have supported Maine educators in providing high quality, locally relevant, hands-on outdoor experiences for Maine youth

I speak in support of this bill both in my professional role and also as a former teacher and a parent

As a teacher in a town just 45 minutes from the ocean, I took a bus full of students to Reid State Park for a marine biology field trip I'll never forget my surprise when so many students who had grown up in Maine had never seen or experienced the ocean Others had never seen the mountains

This program will ensure our kids, whether or not their families have funds to travel, will get to see and experience what Maine has to offer Research and firsthand experience shows the critical years around middle school are a key window for physical, social, and mental health development This is when kids start thinking about their futures, possible career pathways and their beliefs about the place they call home When our youth get to have positive community-based learning experiences they gain a

greater sense of place and connection to this state, making it more likely they will want to stay here to pursue careers, contribute to the Maine economy, raise their families, and participate in their local communities

Maine is known as a national leader in outdoor and environmental education. We are unique for our rich history of outdoor recreation, natural resource-based economy, and the existing infrastructure enabling the state to provide a high quality, locally relevant outdoor school program for every Maine child. This program will increase jobs in the outdoor learning sector statewide, while at the same time exposing our youth to many potential careers in the outdoor recreation, natural sciences, green jobs, and STEM fields.

Finally, I will speak from my heart in support of this bill as a parent. The past few years have been really hard on Maine kids. My own young daughters had 18 months of learning completely upended by COVID. They lost so many social interactions and social skills in the process, learning over zoom, isolated and scared. Both of my kids are still healing, I see them most at peace and at their best when they are off their screens and outside. Maine's kids are not ok, we are seeing unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression in our youth and we have to act. This program would be a way for all Maine kids, not just the kids whose families or schools can afford it, to access transformative, nature-based learning experiences that center social and emotional learning and connection.

For all these reasons, I urge you to support LD 1817, An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program.