

State of Maine  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Richard Colpitts, Director of Education in the Unorganized Territories

In Support of: L.D. 2042

An Act to Update the Laws Governing Education in the Unorganized Territory

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Representative Brennan

Date: January 24, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Richard Colpitts, and I am here today representing the Department speaking in support of L.D. 2042, An Act to Update the Laws Governing Education in the Unorganized Territory. I am currently the Superintendent of Education in the Unorganized Territory and have served the Maine education community as a Superintendent for 20 years. I have also served as President of the Maine School Superintendents Association.

This bill amends the laws governing education in the unorganized territory to be comparable to the laws governing public education in organized areas, including eligibility to enroll in education, compulsory attendance, and truancy. These proposed changes are part of an ongoing review of Chapter 119 – Education in the Unorganized Territories and the DOE’s efforts to ensure that EUT statutes are at parity with rules, expectations, and equity of access with School Administrative Units (SAUs). The current statute was last updated in 1990, and numerous aspects of statute require revision to achieve our goal of parity.

Section 1 addresses student eligibility in the unorganized territory, including minimum ages and exceptions to the eligibility policies. This change brings the EUT policies in line with those of SAUs in Maine.

Section 2 amends the laws governing the transportation of elementary students in the unorganized territory. It removes the provision that prohibits the Commissioner of Education from reimbursing parents for the transportation of a student. Today, the EUT struggles to provide transportation for many of its most remote students, as it only provides transportation on approved public roads. These struggles occur not only because of a bus driver shortage across the State and nation but also because of inefficiencies of transporting small numbers of students living in remote locations. Access to contracted services is very limited. Expanding options to include reimbursing parent drivers over approved public roads will help to fill the gap where EUT buses or contracted services are unavailable and ensures the equity of access for these most remote students. To be clear, the EUT would rely on the option to contract with parents only in

the event that we are unable to provide transportation through other routes. The initial version of the fiscal note for this bill noted that “as General Fund expenditures from this program are fully reimbursed by the Unorganized Territory Education and Services Fund, there will be a corresponding increase in the tax collected through the Unorganized Territory Education and Services Tax” and “the additional tax revenue will reimburse the General Fund for expenditures incurred from this bill.” However, the EUT is able to cover these costs in full using existing resources, therefore there is no need for a General Fund appropriation and there will be no impact to the Unorganized Territory Education and Services Tax.

Sections 3 and 4 modify exceptions for attendance at school to align with those of SAUs in Maine.

For these reasons, the Department of Education is in support of L.D. 2042, An Act to Update the Laws Governing Education in the Unorganized Territories. I am happy to answer any questions, and I will be available for work sessions on this bill.